

EFFECTUATING A COOPERATIVE FUTURE BETWEEN  
IRAN AND THE ARAB STATES OF  
THE PERSIAN GULF

By

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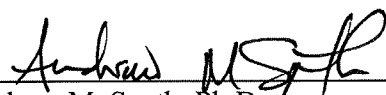
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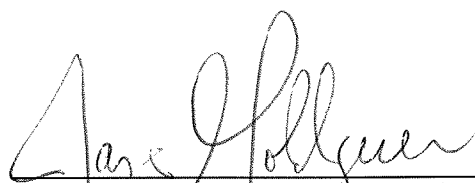
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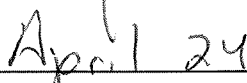
Comparative and Regional Studies – Middle East

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I wholeheartedly dedicate this thesis to the people of Iran and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf  
with the hopes of long-lasting peace, prosperity, and friendship in the region;  
to my mother, Roya, for her love; and to  
my father, Mojtaba, for his support.

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ABSTRACT

There are multiple paths for constructive cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf that can reshape the current contentious relations. Because of numerous mutual concerns, shared historic, religious, and cultural ties, as well as the importance of trade, Iran and the neighboring Arab countries must surmount the costly, zero-sum political frictions of today and envision a cooperative future that ensures the peace and security of the Persian Gulf. This thesis aims to present viable pathways for constructive cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf through analysis of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy objectives and determinants, differentiating and analyzing identified grievances and positive factors in bilateral relations between Iran and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the consequences of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the geopolitics of the region.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action
LNG	Liquid Natural Gas
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
P5+1	China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, plus Germany
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
U.S.	United States of America
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

## بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

به نام خداوند جان و خرد

و همگی به رشته دین خدا چنگ زده و به راههای متفرق نروید، و به یاد آرید این نعمت بزرگ خدا را که شما با هم دشمن بودید، خدا در دلهای شما الفت و مهربانی انداخت و به لطف و نعمت خدا همه برادر دینی یکدیگر شدید، و در پرتگاه آتش بودید، خدا شما را نجات داد. بدین گونه خدا آیاتش را برای راهنمایی شما بیان می کند، باشد که هدایت شوید

(سوره آل عمران، آیه ۱۰۳)

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

(سوره آل عمران، الآية ۱۰۳)

And hold firmly to the strings of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus, Allah makes clear to you His verses that you may be guided.

(Al Imran, 103)

## INTRODUCTION

Owing to the abundance of mutual concerns, shared historic, religious, and cultural ties, as well as the importance and tradition of trade, Iran and the neighboring Arab countries must take advantage of the innate opportunities to envision a cooperative future that ensures the peace and security of the Persian Gulf. There exist multiple paths for constructive cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf that can reshape the current contentious relations and surmount the costly status quo and zero-sum political frictions of today. This thesis aims to present a viable pathway for constructive cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf through analysis of the literature and various approaches to understanding of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy objectives and determinants, the identified grievances and positive factors in bilateral relations between Iran and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the consequences of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the geopolitics of the region.

Ushering in a new era of peace will not be possible if the source of past and current tensions is not identified and rectified. The persistence of grievances and open conflicts has had economic, political, and social consequences for Iran and the GCC countries. If all sides do not arrive at the realization that courteous and cooperative neighborly relations is in their advantage, the hope of peace and stability in the region appears to be dim. The persistence of the current level of strained relations, or the escalation of open conflict to direct military or political confrontation will increase the likelihood of further instability in not only the Persian Gulf, but across the Middle East. Thus, the improvement of relations will benefit not just Iran and the GCC countries, but will also assist in the de-escalation of other regional conflicts, and lead to a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East.

History, before and after the revolution in Iran, is a strong influencer of current relations between the Islamic Republic and the GCC countries, whether positively, as in relations with Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), or negatively, such as the contentious relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. This long history is also multifaceted, and each bilateral relationship has attributes that distinguish it from others. While territorial and religious disputes are at the core of issues with Bahrain, for example, tensions with Saudi Arabia are largely due to the decades-long rivalry for political dominance in the region. On the other hand, the positive relations with the UAE arise from ample trade, and the large population of Iranians in Dubai. Similarly, the longstanding amicable military and economic partnerships with Oman have defined that relationship. Religious and cultural ties between Iran and Kuwait, as well as the shared natural resources between Iran and Qatar are factors that differentiate bilateral relations between Iran and various GCC countries.

The establishment of the GCC in 1981 was a direct consequence of Iran's revolution and the subsequent war between the newly established Islamic Republic and Iraq. In the more than thirty-six years since the Council's establishment, however, there has not been a substantial uniform policy towards Iran, primarily due to the variance in bilateral relationships between Iran and various GCC states. The majority of past disputes between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have been peacefully resolved because of the existing economic or diplomatic ties. However, the deterioration of relations since Iran and the world powers signed the JCPOA in July 2015, and since the Arab Uprisings (Islamic Awakening) of December 2010, have lessened the influence of the positive factors in bilateral and multilateral relations. This has resulted in a perilous political environment that can exacerbate the hostilities in the region and beyond, if earnest measures are not implemented by Iran and the GCC countries.

The 2013 presidential elections were a pivotal turning point in Iran's approach to foreign policy, and a dramatic shift from eight years prior. By revitalizing the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program, the administration of Hassan Rouhani initiated a new approach towards the P5+1—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, United States, plus Germany, that re-introduced Iran into the international community. The end of Iran's isolation, however, had wide-ranging repercussions for the Persian Gulf countries, and Chapter Three of this thesis aims to explore and analyze the consequences of the JCPOA on the geopolitics of the region. By looking at Iran's diplomatic outreach and examining the reactions to the execution of Sheikh Nimr and the ensuing attack on the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran, the chapter presents the diplomatic interactions following the JCPOA. To understand the religious divisions that have been attributed to the rising tensions, the following section analyzes the rise of sectarian and identity politics since the Arab uprisings and their exacerbation in January 2016. Additionally, the opposing roles of Iran and the GCC in the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts have undoubtedly inhibited a *détente*. The chapter concludes by looking at the regional conflicts, followed by an evaluation of the foreign interference in the Persian Gulf and the role of the United States in prolonging the conflict between Iran and the GCC countries.

Much of the discussion surrounding the Persian Gulf is primarily focused on explaining the Iranian-Saudi hostilities as well as the history of religious and political rivalries between the two major regional powers. Undoubtedly, the conflict Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as other points of contention in the Persian Gulf have wide ranging and far-reaching consequences, and are directly tied to the escalation of conflicts elsewhere in the Middle East. However, as a result of the strong attention and focus on the disputes, there have been very few practical calls for dialogue and cooperation between Iran and all members of the GCC, rarely with any possible

roadmap. Past proposals for rapprochement have been short-lived, and new proposals seem superficial rather than actionable plans. The lack of political will, an agenda that is based on the predominant requirements of the region, and the lack of a platform to express grievances, explain the absence of constructive engagement and dialogue between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

This thesis identifies the main points of contention that have shaped relations in the past four decades and recognizes the positive attributes of different bilateral relations that are essential in advancing mutual interests. In Chapter 1, I critically review the literature and analysis on Iran's foreign policy objectives and determinants through three overarching approaches of ideology, critical events, and leader-centric, which comprehensively examines the Islamic Republic's policy formulation towards the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. This allows the differentiation of Iran's bilateral relationships with each member state of the GCC in Chapter 2, that identifies key positive, negative, and contingent factors that exist since 1979, if not for centuries anterior to the revolution in Iran. As the most recent major event that has rebalanced the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf, Chapter 3 explores the consequences of the JCPOA on diplomatic interactions, rise of sectarian and identity politics, the expansion of regional conflicts, as well as the augmentation of foreign presence and interference in the Persian Gulf and their inhibition of the betterment of relations between Iran and the GCC countries.

The compilation of this thesis rests in Chapter 4, where I use tools of conflict resolution in international affairs to propose a pathway with three sequential phases of mediation, negotiations, and constructive dialogue. By establishing a new platform for cooperation, this pathway intends to incrementally widen and strengthen bilateral and multilateral relationships by rectifying persistent antagonisms and building on the existing positive factors.

## CHAPTER 1

### IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES AND DETERMINANTS

In this chapter, I present three dominant approaches of ideology, critical events, and leader centric, to analyzing Iranian foreign policy and its relations with its Arab neighbors. Toward that end, I draw on representative scholarship and policy analysis from these different schools of thought to construct complementary explanations of Iranian foreign policy. These different explanations characterize the core debates over Iran's regional interests and interactions. The majority of the literature and analysis on the Islamic Republic suggests Imam Khomeini's legacy as the leader of the revolution has shaped, and continues to shape, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. The ideology-centric approach, argued by many scholars and Iran analysts, views the persistence of revolutionary ideology in Iran as well as debates its role in the international community between a revisionist or a rational actor. Other scholars argue, however, that viewing Iran's foreign policy as reactions to critical events better explains its approach towards the GCC countries. The Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein's ouster in 2003, and the Arab uprisings are four major events that explain Iran's foreign policy towards the Arab states of the Persian Gulf from this perspective. The third approach views Iran's foreign policy formulation as increasingly driven by the presidency, and hence changing through transition of power. These various approaches elucidate the Islamic Republic's policy towards each member state of the GCC since the 1979 revolution in Iran

#### Ideology: The Rationality Debate

The Islamic Republic of Iran, and indeed its foreign policy, is rooted in an Islamic revolutionary ideology following the 1979 revolution led by Imam Khomeini. The ideological aspects of the newly established Islamic Republic were rooted in the concept of *Velayate Faghih*,



introduced by Imam Khomeini decades prior to the revolution. The concept combines Islam and politics in a dynamic approach towards governance. The objectives and determinants of Iran's foreign policy were framed in the early days of the revolution with particular attention to Islamic principles, opposition to imperialism and Western interference, as well as Imam Khomeini's personal views on Iran, Islam, and the world. This ideological aspect plays an important role in Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, who hold diametrically opposed Islamic and national ideologies, along with contrasting regional policies and approaches.

The literature on Iran's foreign policy pays significant attention to ideology and ways in which Islamic principles, revolutionary ideals, and Imam Khomeini's beliefs form the ideology of the Islamic Republic. The fact that Imam Khomeini, and current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, aim at unifying the entire Muslim *Ummat*, regardless of sectarian divisions, adds to the complexity of the international relations of the Persian Gulf, and challenges the notion of an ancient sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and the Shi'a. Zubaida describes the Iranian revolution as a source of inspiration not only to the Shi'a population of the Middle East, but also to Sunni thinkers and activists. He asserts that "this trend posed a vital danger to the Saudi claim to Islamic legitimacy and leadership, as well as a challenge to the dynastic rulers of that country and its neighbors," and an "inspiration to their oppressed Shi'a populations."<sup>1</sup> Additionally Haddad argues this threat by explaining that since there was a lack of direct attacks on Sunnism, "Iran was viewed as more of a threat to Arabism than to Sunni Islam," bringing together Sunni Arab leaders against Persian influence.<sup>2</sup> However, according to Sen, "Iran's diplomacy has been cautious in emphasizing its "Muslim" character and refrained from being seen as Shi'a power in

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<sup>1</sup> Sami Zubaida, "Sectarian Dimensions," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 2 (2014)

<sup>2</sup> Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Relations in Arab Iraq," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013)

the Sunni-dominated Middle East.”<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the revolution, Imam Khomeini addressed not only the Shi’a, but all Muslims around the world who were fond of his messages against tyranny and his support of religious values. Ambassador Seyyed Hossein Mousavian contends that “since the revolution, Iranian leaders have always stood against sectarianism and have preached a pan-Islamic message.”<sup>4</sup> Iran’s foreign policy track record, he argues, has been of “supporting Shia and Sunni groups, like the Palestinians and Balkan Bosniaks.”<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the existence of a significant Shi’a population in the majority of the Persian Gulf countries naturally plays a role in Iran’s policy and in its relations with the Arab states. As Warner argues, the Persian Gulf states were particularly worried about the revolution’s appeal, “arguably because of Iran’s proximity and the presence of Shi’a in their monarchies.”<sup>6</sup> Leading to an augmentation of threat perceptions by the GCC countries against the Islamic Republic, primarily due to these supposed appealing factors of the revolution.

With the emergence of Islamic movements in Iran and ultimately the 1979 revolution, religious ideology was a force for change and progress, according to Emad el-Din, and it was an ideology “for moving forward in time towards something other than what existed in the Islamic past, and the Western present.”<sup>7</sup> The fact that for more than a millennia there were cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Gülriz Sen, “The Prospects of “Constructive Engagement” in Iran-GCC Relations: The Levant Dimension,” in *Iran’s Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests Over Historic Rivalry*, ed. by Maaïke Warnaar et al. (London: Gerlach Press, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Ambassador Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, *Interview by Mehran Haghiri*, March 19, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Maaïke Warnaar, Luciano Zaccara, and Paul Aarts, “Introduction,” in *Iran’s Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests Over Historic Rivalry*, ed. by Maaïke Warnaar et al. (London: Gerlach Press, 2016)

<sup>7</sup> Aysha Emad el-Din, “Foucault’s Iran and Islamic Identity Politics Beyond Civilizational Clashes, External and Internal,” *International Studies Perspectives* 7 (2006)

differences between Persians and Arabs in the region naturally influenced and directed the Islamic revolution towards a uniquely Iranian-Shi'a version of revolutionary ideology. According to Barrett, even after the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century, "the Persians' self-image did not change; they adopted Islam but they continued to view themselves as culturally and politically, if not militarily, superior to the Arabs."<sup>8</sup> He adds that Iranians, like other ethnic or national groups, have "defined themselves in terms of the contrast with others," i.e. the differences between "Iranians and Arabs, or Iranians and the West."<sup>9</sup> Such inherent as well as sometimes constructed differences are reasons for the resurfacing of animosities between Iran and the GCC countries, even though there have been minimal hostilities in centuries past.

Those who shaped Islamic revolution in Iran naturally pursued what was both Iranian and Shi'a-centric. Those "progressive intellectuals" who were often Western-educated and revolutionary activists became "a defining force in shaping the identity of the Islamic Republic."<sup>10</sup> Doctor Ali Shariati, an influential Western-educated Iranian philosopher, became an advocate of an Islamic "liberation theology" and was killed two years before the revolution.<sup>11</sup> However, his vision was to reclaim the "authentic" revolutionary message of Shi'ism which he saw explicitly as an "intellectually progressive movement as well as a militant social force."<sup>12</sup> Counter to Zubaida, Haddad, and Ambassador Mousavian, who argue Iran's pan-Islamic approach, Emad el-Din believes that the Islamic Republic aimed to "bridge the gap between tradition and modernity,"

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<sup>8</sup> Roby Barrett, *Iran* (McDill, FL: Joint Special Operations University, August 2011)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Emad el-Din, "Iran and Islamic Identity"

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

and shaped Iran's revolutionary identity and ideology by "focusing on the Shi'a doctrine."<sup>13</sup>

While religion plays a significant role in the ideology and policies of the Islamic Republic, an alternative assessment emphasizes revolutionary ideology as a resource for expanding influence. Salem contends that Iran is justified in assuming a leading role in the region because of its geo-strategic location, vast natural resources, defiance of the United States, scientific and technological advancements, as well as Islamic revival.<sup>14</sup> By focusing on the revolutionary ideology, Salem argues that Iran aspires to promote the ideals of its revolution abroad, exemplify its role as a regional leader, and expand on its relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>15</sup> However, Iran has, and continues to, face pushback from other regional and international powers that see the country as a revisionist, and not a status quo power. Hence, prolonging Iran's desire for unity among Muslim countries and its aspirations for leading, or sharing the leadership of, the region with the GCC countries.

If a status quo power is defined as a state that aims to "work within the existing international system and not challenge the current order," a revisionist power can be described as countries primarily concerned with their "own power and prestige above all other considerations." According to Combes, revisionist powers seek to "remodel the international system and order" for their "own benefit and interests."<sup>16</sup> In line with this definition, Zions argues that in order to be considered a revisionist power, Iran would have to have been "pursuing a goal of reshaping the regional status quo by meddling with the politics or territorial boundaries

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Salem, *Building Cooperation in the Eastern Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2010)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Combes, "Between Revisionism and Status Quo: China in International Regimes," *University of Leeds Journal of Politics and International Studies* 6 (Winter 2011/2012)

of another state.”<sup>17</sup> By this definition, Zions contends: “Indeed, Iran’s goal was decidedly revisionist,” since Imam Khomeini had reiterated the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy goals during the Iran-Iraq War, for example, when the fight was viewed more as defending Islam rather than seizing territory.<sup>18</sup> According to Zions, during the Iran-Iraq War, which largely shaped the Islamic Republic’s regional as well as global foreign policy, “the calculus of *realpolitik* did not hold in a situation where the ideals of the revolution itself, not a relative increase of security in the international system, were at stake.”<sup>19</sup>

A revisionist characterization is insufficient for some scholars, however, who argue that the Islamic Republic should be viewed as revolutionary country with revolutionary goals and aspirations.<sup>20</sup> Tenenbaum asserts that “the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be described as a revisionist power,” since doing so “would hardly reflect the dimensions of its regional objectives or the means it is willing to employ in order to bring them about.”<sup>21</sup> The Islamic Republic inherently has a revolutionary ideological structure in all aspects of governance, and the leaders of Iran have implemented and followed policies in line with this vision. Imam Khomeini’s ideology and worldview persisted decades after his passing in 1989. As Takeyh, a staunch anti-Islamic Republic figure in Washington, argues, more than thirty years after Imam Khomeini came to power, the Islamic Republic “remains an outlier in international relations.”<sup>22</sup> Takeyh

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<sup>17</sup> David Zions, “Revisionism and Its Variants: Understanding State Reactions to Foreign Policy Failure,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 4 (October-December 2006): 631-657

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Yoav Tenenbaum, “International Relations: It’s Time To Revise How We Talk About Revisionist Powers,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (October 29, 2012)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ray Takeyh, “All the Ayatollah’s Men,” *National Interest*, September/October 2012.

compares the persistence of the ideological framings of the Islamic Republic to other non-Western revolutionary regimes which “eventually eschewed a rigidly ideological foreign policy and accepted the fundamental legitimacy of the international system.”<sup>23</sup> However, he contends that Iran’s leaders “have remained committed to Khomeini’s worldview,” and that “the resilience of Iran’s Islamist ideology in the country’s foreign policy is striking” when compared to the way modern day Chinese or Vietnamese foreign policy has evolved from the ideology and guidance of Mao and Ho Chi Minh respectively.<sup>24</sup>

Rationality of the Islamic Republic is also a topic of debate in the ideology school of thought some scholars believe Iran’s actions prove its rational calculations in foreign policy decision making, while others contend that those same actions demonstrate the country’s irrationality, as a great emphasis on ideology is seen by some as counter to acting rational. Realists like Mearsheimer say that rational states are “aware of their external environment and they think intelligently about how to maximize their prospects for survival,” and “states pay attention not only to the immediate consequences of their actions, but to the long-term effects as well.”<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, he writes, “rational states miscalculate from time to time because they invariably make important decisions on the basis of imperfect information,” and that throughout history, states “often pursue misguided foreign policies because domestic politics intrude into the policy-making process and trump sound strategic logic.”<sup>26</sup>

With this view on rationality, the Islamic Republic has arguably acted rational where the country has advanced its national objectives and goals while paying the costs for that course of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Reckless States and Realism,” *International Relations* 23, no. 243 (2009): 241-256

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

action. Barrett argues that “the idea that the [Islamic] Republic of Iran is a crazed messianic regime seeking to acquire apocalyptic bombs is a motif invented by opponents of the Iranian regime.”<sup>27</sup> The idea that Iran has expansionist intentions or even apocalyptic objectives is counter to not just the stated aspirations of the Islamic Republic, but it also lacks the basic understanding of Iranian society. “Apocalyptic messianism does not drive Iranian policy,” Barrett insists, “the driver is the geopolitical situation and how Iran perceives its interests.”<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has often said that the Iranians are “apocalyptic,” and has warned against betting on “their rationality.”<sup>29</sup> Senator Lindsey Graham has declared, “I think they’re crazy,” and Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon restated his belief that the government in Iran is a “messianic and apocalyptic regime.”<sup>30</sup>

The fact that some leaders and official government representatives view Iran as an irrational actor stems from viewing rationality in their terms, expecting reasonability rather than factoring in Iran’s national interests. Kenneth Pollack illustrates in his book that Iran “has been not just rational but prudent, pushing forward when it sees an opportunity, backing off when it sees dangers.”<sup>31</sup> As survival and advancement of national interests are the most important elements of rationality in international affairs, Iran’s geo-strategic location forces the adoption of policies that are counter to the interests of those who view Iranian leaders as messianic. Zakaria supports his argument that Iran is a rational actor based on a geo-strategic context:

Look at a map of the Middle East. Shiite Iran is surrounded by hostile Sunni states. Across the Persian Gulf sits Saudi Arabia, its fanatically anti-Shiite and well-armed

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<sup>27</sup> Barrett, “Iran ”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Is Iran rational?” *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

archenemy. In Iraq and Syria, Iran faces large Sunni insurgencies dedicated to slaughtering the Shiites. Add to this the nuclear dimension. Iran has several nuclear-armed neighbors —Pakistan, India, Russia, China and Israel. Plus, Iran has faced active opposition from the world’s superpower for more than three decades.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Ambassador Abdullah Sohrabi insists that Iran’s foreign policy has been “rational since the Islamic revolution.”<sup>33</sup> How rationality is defined by Iran or any other country depends solely on national interests and a cost benefit analysis of actions. Rationality does not equate to being reasonable, nor adhering to an established norm. Often goals, values, and principles of countries are viewed counter to those of other nations, even though they may be completely rational. For example, a former U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, contends that the regime in Iran is a “rational actor,” at the time of heightened concerns over Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>34</sup> On the same line, a retired United States general asserted in an interview that Iran is “obviously” rational, and reasoned that “we don’t like a lot of their behavior in the world,” but “just because you don’t agree with somebody, doesn’t make them an irrational actor.”<sup>35</sup> While these statements stirred much controversy in the United States, they illustrate the understanding of the realities on the ground by some officials and analysts.

Nasser Hadian believes that Iran is “the most important linkage state in the Middle East,” for reasons of “geography, history, ambition, and a jealousy guarded sense of independence.” Based on these facts, he says that Iran is “central to nearly all issues of importance to the region,” including the “Palestinian-Israeli conflict, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, Persian Gulf security,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ambassador Abdullah Sohrabi, *Interview by Mehran Haghiri*, December 21, 2016

<sup>34</sup> Michael Singh, “Is the Iranian regime rational?” *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Rahel Gabreyes, “General Stanley McChrystal Says Iran Is ‘Obviously’ A Rational Actor,” *The Huffington Post*, May 14, 2015.



energy, and the future of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan.”<sup>36</sup> Whether its actions are perceived as rational or not, largely depend on the level of its impact on other countries. Iran’s foreign policy is often at odds with the majority of the GCC countries in the immediate region, as well as in the Middle East and South West Asia, due to the same reasoning put forward by Hadian. The complexity of diverging foreign policies leads to the establishment of threat perceptions that, once again, are in direct opposition to one another. For example, Hadian argues that Iran views the United States, Israel, chaos in the region, and the current world order as major determinants of Iran's actions. Based on such threat perception, he reasons, Iran is active around the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to “deter the United States and the Israelis,”<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, Iran's close relations with Hezbollah, a group that was designated as a terrorist organization by the GCC and the Arab League, is an important example of Iran's regional calculation. Hadian argues that “Iran relies on its missiles and Hezbollah’s missiles as two sources of deterrence,” and that “Lebanon has inherent values” for Iran, while “Syria has instrumental” merits.<sup>38</sup> However, the majority of the GCC countries that are also actively involved in the region view Iran’s policies and behavior as a threat to their national and regional interests. In this regard, Ambassador Marcele Wahba argues that “there is a very strong belief that Iran has hegemonic aspiration, there is no doubt about that.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the Ambassador asserts that “I think almost every country in the Middle East, whether the GCC, or as far as removed as Egypt and Jordan, while they do not feel as directly threatened by Iran, they do believe that Iran has a very strong sense of its regional role, of what kind of role it should have,

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<sup>36</sup> Nasser Hadian, *Iran Debates Its Regional Role* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, September 2015)

<sup>37</sup> Panel Discussion. *Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement Possible?* (Doha, Qatar: Brookings Doha Center, April 7, 2016)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ambassador Marcele Wahba, *Interview by Mehran Haghiri*, March 7, 2017

what kind of country it should be, and its historic, civilizational aspirations,”<sup>40</sup> illustrating the uncertain conception of Iran’s intentions among the Arab countries which has aroused suspicion and augmented threat perceptions. In this regard, Hadian insists that “both sides have not done a good job in formulating and presenting threat perceptions,” which has led to the current animosities between Iran and the GCC countries.<sup>41</sup>

An alternative approach to understanding Iranian foreign policy towards the GCC countries is looking at the various events that have dramatically altered the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf ever since Iran’s revolution in 1979, including the Iran-Iraq War, the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the Arab uprisings in 2010.

#### Critical Events Approach

A multitude of scholars argue that Iran’s foreign policy toward the GCC and the broader Middle East can be best understood through the events that occurred following the 1979 revolution. The war between Iran and Iraq that started a year after the establishment of the Islamic Republic has greatly influenced its foreign policy formulation, as well as the political and security approach of the country in the region. Furthermore, the Iran-Iraq War also strained relations with the other Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and continues to be a major influencer of the country’s bilateral and multilateral relations with the GCC countries three decades after its end. The legacy of the Iran-Iraq War has arguably been the dominant force behind Iran’s policies in the three subsequent major regional events, including the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein, the Arab uprisings since 2010, and the resurfacing of extremist and terrorist organizations since 2014 with the rise of Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Panel Discussion. “Saudi-Iranian”

Levant). The ideological approach emphasizes a singular event, the Iranian revolution, as a rather static view of that one source of Iranian foreign policy and interests. The critical events approach, on the other hand, takes a more dynamic view of history, showing how numerous historical events influenced the development of Iranian-Arab relations over time.

The 1979 revolution was the primary reason for the start of the Iran-Iraq War, and According to Venegas, with the Islamic Revolution's success in Iran, one of its primary perceived goals was "to spread into Iraq, because Iraq had a secular regime."<sup>42</sup> Venegas argues that Iran's actions in the early months of 1980 that aimed at undermining the Ba'athist regime in Iraq provided "the foundation for Saddam's and his advisors' increasing anger," and the ultimate decision to attack Iran.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Kassicieh points out the opportunity for Iraq to take advantage of this delicate time in Iran's internal affairs, especially because Saddam Hussein saw himself as the protectorate of the Arab world from the perceived Iranian threat.<sup>44</sup> Kassicieh argues that the disruptive situation in the months after Iran's revolution offered Iraq "a rare opportunity" to try to settle the border dispute "from a position of military superiority and on terms more favorable to Iraq," rather than adhering to the Algiers Accord that settled the conflict in 1975.<sup>45</sup> The resurfacing of the border disputes and the rights to the Shatt-al Arab waterway became the pretext for Saddam Hussein's surprise aerial bombardment of Iran on September 22, 1980, and the subsequent eight years of war. However, the primary purpose of the attack was to contain and ultimately overthrow the Islamic Republic: for this reason, the majority of the Arab

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<sup>42</sup> Ana Venegas, *Saddam's Generals* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2011)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Suleiman Kassicieh, "Political Risk in the Gulf: The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Governments and Multinational Corporations," *California Management Review* 28, no. 2 (1986)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

states, particularly Iran's southern neighbors who formed the GCC after the war began, supported Iraq.

Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq just months after the Iranian Revolution, and quickly won the support and admiration of the majority of Iraqis because of his strong nationalist rhetoric during his vice-presidency. Hence, in line with his anti-monarchial and anti-nationalist views, it was natural for Imam Khomeini to declare open hostility towards secular nationalism such as that of Iraq's Ba'ath philosophy: a threat deeply sensed by Hussein. Imam Khomeini stated: "Those who bring separation and division among the Muslims by resorting to phrases such as nationalism or nationalists are the army of Satan, contributing to the superpowers and the enemies of the Quran,"<sup>46</sup> leading to what Zionts argues is a war that the Islamic Republic thought would continue until the "defeat of the villainous Saddam Hussein and Ba'th Party for the sake of freeing the oppressed Iraqi people and spreading the Islamic Revolution" across the region and beyond.<sup>47</sup>

In addition, Takeyh argues that aside from the unwarranted attack by Iraq, the war had religious connotations for the Islamic Republic, stating that "for the Iranian regime, the war was an assault on Islam and the Prophet's legacy by profane forces of disbelief."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Takeyh contends that the war became a contest of ideologies and a competition for power for both Iran as well as Iraq and its supporters, as the two sides were dictated by diametrically opposed ideologies.<sup>49</sup> Saddam Hussein's goals were to end the threat posed by the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology to the entire Arab world, inhibit Iran from advancements in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Zionts, "Revisionism and Its Variants"

<sup>48</sup> Ray Takeyh, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2010)

<sup>49</sup> Kassiech, "Political Risks"

Iraqi territory, as well as to conquer the Iranian province of Khuzestan, if not the entire country. Additionally, Saddam Hussein also wanted to further weaken Iran militarily so that Iraq would become the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, and help create conditions in Iran that would trigger the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.

After witnessing Iran's resistance, and Iraq's dramatically decreased military supplies and personnel, on April 3, 1982, Saddam Hussein presented an unofficial cease fire by third parties through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). However, the offer was quickly rejected by the Iranian government.<sup>50</sup> The Iraqi invasion presented Imam Khomeini with an opportunity to further reinforce and strengthen the new regime in Iran and prove its strength to the world, and after two years of an imposed war, Alfoneh argues, Iran did not accept the cease fire to pursue its own national interests in line with its revolutionary ideology and to counter the Western-backed countries in the region.<sup>51</sup> The war with Iraq, or the *sacred defense* as it is commonly referred to in Iran, indeed allowed the government to solidify its revolutionary ideology in its domestic and foreign policies as argued by the aforementioned scholars. However, the war prevented Iran from conveying its message of unity to the neighboring and regional Muslim countries, and further isolated the Islamic Republic from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Alfoneh cites an important interview from 2008, where Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani reiterated the Islamic Republic's desire to use the war as a pretext for Iran's domestic and regional aspirations. A prominent Iranian political scientist, Sadegh Zibakalam, argued with Ayatollah Rafsanjani in the interview by stating "my conclusion is that deep down, Imam Khomeini was happy about the war. He never said so directly, but deep down he thought that it

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<sup>50</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "What the Iran-Iraq War Can Teach United States Officials," *Middle East Forum* 20, no. 2 (2013)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

was not us who wanted to attack the Ba'ath regime of Iraq, but now that they have attacked us, we will pursue the war to the very end.”<sup>52</sup> To this Ayatollah Rafsanjani responded: “I agree with your view. But it is not true that it was deep in his heart. Imam Khomeini would also say that aloud. He did not hide it. The war gave us a path to solve the regional problems and build our nation. We all said this, and the Imam too was of this belief.”<sup>53</sup> This statement gives insight into the rational decision-making calculus of the Islamic Republic's leadership during the war.

Even though the war ended on July 3, 1988 without a clear victor, Hussein claimed victory for Iraq on behalf of the Arab world; however, the ensuing domestic and regional challenges pitted Iraq against the countries that heavily supported its war with Iran. Abdulrahman Hussein asserts that Iraq soon proved its disloyalty to the GCC countries through a letter sent by the Iraqi Foreign Minister to the Arab League on July 16, 1990, alleging that Kuwait had advanced into Iraqi territory by stealing its oil, and that the UAE and Kuwait were planning to dismantle Iraq's oil industry altogether by allowing the drop in prices.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Tariq Aziz stated that the *minimal* financial aid received from Saudi Arabia and the UAE during the war with Iran were a fraction of the cost Iraq endured as a “shield and protector of the eastern flank of the Arab world from the Iranian revolution.”<sup>55</sup>

One example illustrates the deep involvement of the GCC countries in the war, the counters Aziz's claim, however: the revenue from “Kuwaiti and Saudi oil production from the Neutral Zone territory on their border” which amounted to “approximately 650,000 barrels per

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Abdulrahman Hussein, *So History Doesn't Forget: Alliances Behavior in Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 1979-1990* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2012),

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

day” was “loaned to Iraq to support the war effort” since 1982 and stopped only when the fighting did.<sup>56</sup> The fact that Saddam Hussein was unappreciative of the assistance received from the majority of the GCC states, and the invasion of Kuwait that followed less than two years after the war proved to the GCC countries and the international community that the ruling regime in Iraq could no longer be trusted. According to Alterman, the GCC “just wanted Saddam Hussein gone.” Even though he had been the client of the GCC in “balancing against Iran in the 1980s”, his invasion of Kuwait “revealed him as a menace.”<sup>57</sup>

The subsequent Persian Gulf war from August 1990 to January 1991 that stopped the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, forced the recalibration of regional, political and security policies of the GCC countries. Since self-reliance in defense and security matters is a “difficult, if not unachievable goal for Gulf monarchies’ narrow demographic base, political constraints, and fear of overthrow or coup,” according to Gause, the invasion of Kuwait was a clear sign that the Arab states of the Persian Gulf needed “to invest and depend heavily on the United States protection patronage.”<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, however, the increasing involvement and presence of the United States in the Persian Gulf has been, and continues to be, a clear nuisance for the Islamic Republic, and as Ambassador Mousavian argues, “Iran’s major security threat is the United States military presence in the region and all around the Iranian borders.”<sup>59</sup> While tensions between Iran and the GCC countries gradually faded during the decade after the Persian Gulf war, the GCC’s expanded cooperation with the United States, and their facilitation of the

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<sup>56</sup> Gregory Gause, “Iraq and the Gulf War: Decision-Making in Baghdad,” *University of Vermont*, 1999.

<sup>57</sup> Jon Alterman, *Iraq and the Gulf States: The Balance of Fear* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, August 2007)

<sup>58</sup> Gregory Gause, *Oil Monarchies* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994), 119-145

<sup>59</sup> Mousavian, “Interview”

establishment of military installations by the United States in the region, is by far the strongest grievance of the Islamic Republic toward its Arab neighbors.

With the United States' military involvement in Iraq since 2003, and the subsequent ouster of Saddam Hussein, the security and political dimensions of the Persian Gulf once again drastically changed. According to Molavi, along with the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the 2003 invasion "weakened Iraq," thereby "strengthening Iran's relative regional power as it poured resources into shaping post-Saddam Iraq."<sup>60</sup> Kamrava adds that "for Iran, the significance of the elimination of a major regional rival, and the subsequent political ascendance of Iraqi Shi'ites, cannot be over-emphasized."<sup>61</sup> He further asserts that following the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Iran was presented with "a host of new security challenges, as well as with tremendous opportunities to advance its national and regional interests."<sup>62</sup> In contrast, however, the Islamic Republic's growing influence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the accession of a Shi'a government into power in Iraq, are major points of concern for Saudi Arabia and other GCC states.

The fall of Saddam Hussein and Iran's evident, yet, calculated maneuvering in Iraq, was crucially important for the Islamic Republic, as Kamrava points out, the reasons such as concerns over ethnic and sectarian conflicts, the dangers that a fragmented Iraq would pose, the potential for the spillover of insurgent and terrorist activities, and more importantly, the presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops within striking distance of Tehran.<sup>63</sup> For these

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<sup>60</sup> Afshin Molavi, *Iran and the Gulf States* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015)

<sup>61</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian Foreign and Security Policies in the Persian Gulf," in *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011): 200

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



reasons, Kamrava contends, Iran encouraged “the emergence of a viable, pluralist, and stable central government in Baghdad,” as it “ensures that the country remains intact, that the insurgency is contained, and that the American occupation forces are likely to withdraw from the country sooner rather than later.”<sup>64</sup> However, as Rubin points out, it was hard for Iraq “to demonstrate to the world that it is free of Iranian influence.” The then Foreign Minister of Iraq, Hoshyar Zebari stated, there are “some doubts in the minds and hearts of some of the Arab countries.”<sup>65</sup> Rubin argues that “Iran’s influence is indisputable,” and that the country that harbored the greatest uncertainty was, and continues to be, Saudi Arabia.<sup>66</sup> Prince Turki Al Faisal, regarding the Maliki administration in Iraq which tilted heavily towards the Islamic Republic, explains: “Saudi Arabia had told the United States previously that when it brought a Shiite-dominated government to power,” it “handed Iraq to Iran on a golden plate.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, the differing aspirations for Iraq added to the already complex geo-strategic rivalry between Iran and Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Furthermore, the post-Saddam challenges in Iraq further increased indirect confrontations between Iran and some GCC countries, which further increased following the start of the Arab uprisings. Iranian officials were *initially* vocally supportive of the Arab uprisings that occurred across the Middle East and North Africa starting in December 2010.<sup>68</sup> Ostovar writes that “when protests erupted across Bahrain and Egypt, Iran’s leaders cheered the outpouring of discontent as

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Alissa Rubin, “Iraq Tries to Prove Autonomy, and Makes Inroads,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016)

righteous and legitimate.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, he recollects that “Iranian officials were particularly vocal regarding Bahrain, where they called on the ruling Sunni Al Khalifah family to respect popular democracy and the will of the country’s people,” creating a new wave of tensions between Iran and the GCC countries.<sup>70</sup> Due to its revolutionary nature, the Islamic Republic generally supports the concept of political uprisings against monarchies and the countries that are dependent on Western ‘hegemonic’ powers, or as the constitution declares, “while it completely abstains from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world.”<sup>71</sup>

Bahraini leaders and their allies in the GCC and the West had a strong belief that Iran was behind the Shi’a uprisings in Bahrain, even though the uprising in Bahrain was, according to Ostovar, “a populist, grassroots movement by a marginalized, yet demographic-majority community, seeking greater inclusion and political reform.”<sup>72</sup> As it was a Shi’a uprising, however, it “triggered the deeply ingrained fears of Gulf Arab leaders, who have long worried that Iran could use Shia populations to destabilize their monarchies. They saw Iran’s hand in the unrest and collectively moved to crush it,” according to Ostovar.<sup>73</sup> Other scholars, including Fürtig also believe that the GCC countries “did not only fear the knock-on effect of a popular uprising, but also an imminent Iranian victory.”<sup>74</sup> Similar to Ostovar, Fürtig argues that “the presence of a Shi’a majority in Bahrain gave rise to their suspicions that an insurgent victory

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Appendix 1. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 154

<sup>72</sup> Ostovar, “Sectarian Dilemmas”

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Henner Fürtig. *Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion* (Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies. November 2013)

would, in fact, constitute a success for Tehran, increasing the necessity of putting an end to the uprisings.<sup>75</sup>

In Syria, however, scholars point out Iran's opposition to the uprising. Iran views the unrest as foreign plot, and Fürtig writes that “to the dismay of Tehran, the uprising in Syria put Iran in a similar situation to the one that Saudi Arabia was facing in Bahrain.”<sup>76</sup> In consonance Ostovar states that “Iran’s eager endorsement of the Arab Spring stumbled when it hit Syria,” largely due to the fact “unlike the demonstrations in Egypt and Bahrain, which threatened unfriendly governments, the protests in Syria put Iran’s foremost ally at risk.”<sup>77</sup> Syria’s importance for Iran is multifold. Syria, since the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, and increasingly under Bashar Al Assad, has been “a central node” in Iran’s “strategy against Israel and the United States,” and “Assad has been the linchpin of Iran’s support to Hezbollah and a core member of Iran’s axis of resistance.”<sup>78</sup> The axis of resistance, as it is called in Iran, or the Shi’a crescent, commonly referred to by others, is central to Iran’s foreign policy and geo-strategic calculations. The Syrian uprising, thus, is considered a major threat as “Iran’s enemies and rivals have backed Syria’s largely Sunni rebels,” and according to Ostovar, it has raised the stakes for Tehran.”<sup>79</sup> In addition, Fürtig argues that “losing Syria would constitute Iran’s biggest strategic defeat for thirty years, resulting in a loss of strategic access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and the Palestinian issue, as well as a physical presence along the Israeli border.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ostovar, “Sectarian Dilemmas”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Fürtig, “Arab Spring”

Bearing in mind the importance of Syria for the Islamic Republic, according to Fürtig, Iranian officials view the situation in Syria as “akin to a civil war given the presence of specific demands,” including “territorial secession, autonomy and independence,” which “had been incited by foreigners pursuing their own interests.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the rise of Daesh and its occupation of large sums of land in Syria and Iraq had forced an increase in Iranian involvement in the two countries. The Daesh dimension is among the most important factors that justifies the Islamic Republic’s involvement in Syria, as Iran is a sworn target of the terrorist group. As an example of the rationale behind Iran’s military and financial involvement in Syria, Mohammad Marandi provides insight into the mindset of ordinary Iranians and how they view the country’s actions in the region as advancing the national security of Iran. In response to a reporter’s claim that Iran spends “about a billion dollars a year supporting Bashar Al Assad in Syria, and about 800 million dollars a year supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon,” as well as the question of whether that money could have been better used in developing Iran’s needs, Marandi replied, “If Iran had not supported Syria and the people in Lebanon, we would not have Syria today, and we would not have a Lebanon, and we probably would not have Iraq. If these countries had fallen, we would have to fight Daesh inside Iran.”<sup>82</sup>

According to an alternative point of view, Iran is involved in Syria to counter the threats from terrorist groups against Shi’a holy sites, most importantly the shrine of Hazrat Zeynab, the granddaughter of Prophet Mohammad, and according to Al Samadi, the “necessity of confronting Takfiris in Syria and Iraq to prevent their infiltration into Iran.”<sup>83</sup> With this view,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Mohammad Marandi, “Discussion with BBC Hardtalk,” *BBC London*, February 24, 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Fatima Al Samadi, “Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives Establishing Iran’s Monopolism,” *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, March 18, 2017.

Ostovar contends that “by equating takfirism and Wahhabism, Iran further muddies the water of identity politics,” adding to the already increasing sectarian politics in the region, which “beget further acrimony from Iran’s Sunni neighbors.”<sup>84</sup> Ostovar further argues that Iran’s antipathy for Wahhabi and Salafi jihadism is unsurprising, since “both teach that Shiism is a dangerous and deviant sect,” the “believers of which are beyond the fold of Islam.”<sup>85</sup>

While the critical event approach presents wide ranging justification and rationale of Iranian foreign policy, the various leadership styles within the Iranian government better depict the changes and the nuances in the Islamic Republic’s policy making towards the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

#### Leader Centric Approach

Revolutionary ideology and the Iran-Iraq War largely shaped the foundations of Iran’s foreign policy objectives in general, and towards Arab states of the Persian Gulf in particular. However, Iran’s system of governance has both core attributes and flexible ones which generate different approaches toward different countries, based on established red lines and the leadership style of different presidents. In other words, while there is an established framework that all leaders of the Islamic Republic observe, there is a wide gap between the approaches of different leaders. The core elements, such as following Islamic principles in policy making and resisting foreign presence and dominance in the Middle East and across the Muslim world, are strict practices in the Islamic Republic’s international affairs. However, Iran’s foreign policy is increasingly driven by the presidency and the flexibility it allows through transition of power.

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<sup>84</sup> Ostovar, “Sectarian Dilemmas”

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Thus, many scholars, are of the opinion that a leader-centric approach more comprehensively depicts Iran's policy toward Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Imam Khomeini's ideology, vision, and legacy, as the founder of the revolution and the first Supreme Leader, continues to guide the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policies. Ever since Imam Khomeini's demise on June 3, 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was the third president of the Islamic Republic, was elected by the Assembly of Experts the following day as the second Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. Regarding the Supreme Leader's official capacity, Article 57 of Iran's constitution declares that "the powers of government in the Islamic Republic are vested in the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive powers, functioning under the supervision of the absolute religious Leader and the Leadership of the Ummah," meaning that the Supreme Leader is the *Valiye Faghih* and head of state, and consequently the President is second in command, as he is only the head of the executive branch.<sup>86</sup>

The leader-centric approach itself has been widely debated. Most scholars and analysts argue that the Supreme Leader has the ultimate say in Iran's foreign policy, and insist that no other factor or person has the power to alter his position. Posch argues that the "political power is concentrated in his [the Supreme Leader's] hands and his competencies are both administrative-bureaucratic and clerical and ideological."<sup>87</sup> The Supreme Leader's ascribed title as the *vali-amr-e moslemin-e jehan* (the implementer of the will of the Muslim world), and Iran's claim to be the leading Islamic power, "has led to major problems with the Sunni countries, particularly Saudi

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<sup>86</sup> Appendix 1. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 57

<sup>87</sup> Walter Posch, *The Third World, Global Islam, and Pragmatism: The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik German Institute for International and Security Affairs, April 2013)

Arabia, but also Egypt and Turkey,” according to Posch.<sup>88</sup> A similar viewpoint by Al Dosari argues that Iranian foreign policy has not and will not change due to the superseding power of the Supreme Leader. Al Dosari insists that the presidents follow their predecessors’ policy with “slightly different tactics,” while adhering to the overall approach of Ayatollah Khamenei, “as the Supreme Leader is the one who is responsible for steering Iranian foreign policy.”<sup>89</sup> This argument, however, falls flat when the varying approaches by different presidents are considered, and as Shabani and Rouhi assert, politics “is never that simple in the Islamic Republic. Iranian decision-making resembles a pentagon, rather than a pyramid.”<sup>90</sup>

Through the change in leadership following the passing of Imam Khomeini, there has been a dramatic shift in Iranian policy and decision making process. As Posche contends, the Islamic Republic moved away from “the phase of aggressively ideological or utopian foreign policy,” and since Ayatollah Khamenei and Ayatollah Rafsanjani assumed their respective offices in 1989, “pragmatism, professionalism and national interests have come to the fore, but of course without ideology being abandoned as a frame of reference.”<sup>91</sup> With respect to Iran's policy in the Persian Gulf following the Iran-Iraq War and the change in leadership, Posche believes that the Islamic Republic “sees itself as a hegemon, which inevitably brings Tehran into conflict with the other Gulf powers, particularly Saudi Arabia.”<sup>92</sup> Additionally Posche asserts that “the relationship of the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf to the Islamic Republic of Iran

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Khatami visit opens Saudi door,” *BBC World News*, May 15, 1999.

<sup>90</sup> Mohammad Ali Shabani, and Mahsa Rouhi, “Rowhani the Decision Shaper,” *The National Interest*, August 26, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> Posch. “The Third World”

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

is characterized by mistrust – a mistrust of Iranian nationalism and a mistrust rooted in the fear that Iran will exert a subversive influence on the Shi’a in the region.”<sup>93</sup>

By looking at the nationalist sentiments in Iran and the social construct of Iranian identity we see that the leaders of the Islamic Republic are not monolithic, and there have been differing approaches to foreign policy. Since the early days of the revolution, after the war with Iraq, and during the prolonged nuclear negotiations, multiple groups, organizations, and political parties have emerged with different views and varied levels of influence. While the majority of these groups and members abide by the core principles of the revolution, the Velayete Faghih, and the constitution of the Islamic Republic, they differ in their long-term outlook for Iran. Aside from the role of the Supreme Leader, from the early days of the Islamic Republic, the President and his cabinet have increasingly influenced and altered Iran’s non-strict principles in various ways.

President Rafsanjani was a major influencer of the Islamic Republic’s post-war domestic and foreign policies, and in Imam Khomeini’s absence, Ayatollah Rafsanjani helped strengthen the Islamic Republic along with the new leadership. In Ansari’s words, Ayatollah Rafsanjani was “the great manipulator,” because of his central role in the formation of the Islamic Republic since the revolution and more importantly the post-war reconstruction of the country.<sup>94</sup> Ayatollah Rafsanjani was essential in convincing Imam Khomeini to accept the United Nations brokered ceasefire with Iraq, and it was during his presidency that Iran resumed diplomatic and economic relations with the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf, and the West. However, Ayatollah Rafsanjani faced challenges by rival factions and officials within the government. In the point of view of Ramirez, “while Rafsanjani represents the more progressive sentiments of the Iranian

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ali Ansari, “Iran under Ahmadinejad: Populism and Its Malcontents,” *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (July 2008): 683-700



people,” opponents of his policies, including Ayatollah Khamenei, “appeal to their traditional religious sensibilities.”<sup>95</sup> Ansari writes that Ayatollah Rafsanjani gradually adopted reformist policies in the face of growing systemic opposition, and that while “these political maneuvers in many ways reflected personal rivalries, ... they did also reflect different approaches to politics” as well.<sup>96</sup>

Ayatollah Rafsanjani managed to lift the shadow of hostilities and mistrust that had strained relations with the GCC countries in the 1980s, and soon after he assumed the presidency, he proclaimed, “Iran needs to stop making enemies.”<sup>97</sup> Molavi argues that Ayatollah Rafsanjani “saw the GCC states not as ripe pawns to be toppled, but as cash-rich investors to entice.”<sup>98</sup> With this view, the new Iranian approach was relatively well received in the Arab world, and in response to this overture by Iran, Prince Saud Al Faisal, the then Saudi foreign minister, suggested that his country and the Islamic Republic could see “a future of positive relations.”<sup>99</sup> Ramirez adds that as part of Ayatollah Rafsanjani’s foreign policy approach to foster economic cooperation with the region as well as the international community, Iran’s “stance toward Saudi Arabia also altered.”<sup>100</sup> For example, to officially begin a new era in relations, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement of cooperation in 1993 to increase economic relations and collaboration as OPEC members.<sup>101</sup> As a result, Iran’s bilateral relations

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<sup>95</sup> Dan Ramirez, “The Faithful Opposition: Religious Resistance to Rafsanjani,” *Harvard International Review* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 42

<sup>96</sup> Ansari, “Ahmadinejad”

<sup>97</sup> Molavi, “Gulf States”

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ramirez, “Faithful Opposition,” 74

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

with the GCC countries changed from confrontational to constructive cooperation leading to increased trade, restoring direct flight links, and allowing money to flow more freely across borders.<sup>102</sup> As Ambassador Wahba said: “During the Rafsanjani years, the GCC states saw him as somebody who is open to having a dialogue,” leading to a more constructive relationship than in the past.<sup>103</sup>

The pragmatic foreign policy continued during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who further enhanced the image of the Islamic Republic on the international stage, and more importantly, further strengthened bilateral relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. President Khatami campaigned on a platform for democratization, dialogue, as well as domestic and foreign reforms, and was elected with overwhelming popular support in 1997. Khatami’s approach was viewed as counter to the inherent conservative, revolutionary, and ideological policies of the Islamic Republic, and consequently the domestic opposition to President Khatami grew larger than it did during Ayatollah Rafsanjani’s time in office. Ansari posits that in the post-Khomeini era, there was an increased rivalry for power by factions with differing views on Iran’s economic policies, level of religiosity, and foreign relations.<sup>104</sup> Ansari writes that “at the very time when Khatami was seeking the desacralization of the state and a concentration of power within the republican organs of government, his ideological enemies were countering with a process of sacralization through the office of the Leader, which was expanded dramatically in this period.”<sup>105</sup> The differing visions and the insufficient powers of the Khatami administration inhibited implementation of the majority of domestic reforms, however,

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<sup>102</sup> Molavi, “Gulf States”

<sup>103</sup> Wahba, “Interview”

<sup>104</sup> Ansari, “Ahmadinejad”

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

much of his foreign policy succeeded in changing Iran's relations with neighboring countries as well internationally.

In foreign policy President Khatami was successful in three major areas: proposing the dialogue among civilizations at the United Nations, defusing the tensions over Iran's nuclear program (until the end of his presidency), and more importantly, solidifying the overture to the Arab states. The latter helped reshape the Islamic Republic's bilateral and multilateral relations with the GCC countries. Soon after assuming power, President Khatami hosted the annual conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Tehran, bringing all Muslim leaders to the Islamic Republic, many for the first time. While Al Dosari insists that the presidents do not differ much in their foreign policies, he acknowledges that Khatami's role as the host of the OIC enhanced Iran's relations with the Arab states, and provided opportunities for cooperation. Al Dosari states that the conference "helped to shutter the long decades of animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran" and the relations further improved when President Khatami visited Saudi Arabia in 1999, which marked the first visit by an Iranian leader since the revolution.<sup>106</sup> Saudi Arabia's King Fahd said during a meeting with Khatami that "the groundbreaking visit by the Iranian president has opened the door for strengthened relations between the two countries."<sup>107</sup>

Additionally, President Khatami was able to utilize the enhanced image of Iran on the international stage following his proposal for dialogue among civilization to the United Nations General Assembly in 2001. His pragmatic foreign policy thwarted the escalation of concerns over Iran's nuclear program, and assisted the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the E3 group

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<sup>106</sup> Noof Rashid Al Dosari, "Foreign Policy From Khatami to Ahmadinejad: There is One Foreign Policy in Iran, Which is Khamenei's Foreign Policy," *World Journal of Social Science Research* 2, no. 1 (2015)

<sup>107</sup> "Khatami Visit"

of European countries (United Kingdom, France, Germany, led by the European Union's high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy). This is a clear illustration of how Iranian foreign policy and decision making is tied to the approach of the president. During the first two years of negotiation over Iran's nuclear program from 2003 to 2005, the Khatami Administration managed to negotiate with the European Union to temporarily halt Iran's nuclear enrichment. The negotiating team, led by Hassan Rouhani, illustrated the determination of the reformist government to negotiate as well as inhibit the intensification of conflict.

In 2005, however, Iran's foreign relations and policies once again shifted dramatically with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Islamic Republic's ideological, revolutionary, and confrontational policies once again resurfaced, and according to Maloney, "Ahmadinejad's presidency reversed the trajectory of Iran's post-war path of moderation, and put the revolution back on a collision course with the international community."<sup>108</sup> While Ahmadinejad was "lauded for his apparent popularity and his common touch with ordinary people," Ansari argues, "his presidency has nevertheless displayed some of the most repressive tendencies of any leader since 1979."<sup>109</sup> Ahmadinejad's revamping of the domestic and foreign policies of the previous two administrations also had a negative impact on Iran's relations with the GCC countries, and as Molavi puts it, "the days of détente seemed a distant memory."<sup>110</sup> Regarding the Islamic Republic's relations with Saudi Arabia, Molavi argues that the two countries "increasingly found

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<sup>108</sup> Suzanne Maloney, *Iran Surprises Itself and the World: A New President May Take His Country in a New Direction* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2013)

<sup>109</sup> Ansari, "Ahmadinejad," 684

<sup>110</sup> Molavi, "Gulf States"

themselves vying for regional influence in proxy battles in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Iraq and even Afghanistan.”<sup>111</sup>

Even though Ahmadinejad was the first ever Iranian leader and foreign official to attend a GCC Summit in 2007 in Doha, his lack of diplomatic capabilities and inadequate conveying of his proposal led to the deterioration of relations. Ahmadinejad proposed in his speech at the Summit the “establishment of economical and security pacts and institutions among the seven states” to “serve the people of our region” and enable “peace and prosperity for all.”<sup>112</sup> Ahmadinejad proposed twelve points during his remarks for increasing brotherly relations and expanding cooperation in multiple areas, including joint ventures, waving visa restrictions, establishing a security cooperation organization, and environmental cooperation, among others.<sup>113</sup>

While the entirety of the twelve points of Ahmadinejad’s proposal are of interest to Iran and the GCC countries, he failed to build on, or even maintain, the amicable relations that he inherited. Additionally, the expansion of Iran’s nuclear program by Ahmadinejad in 2006 led to the opening of Iran’s portfolio at the United Nations Security Council, in accordance to Chapter Seven of the United Nations and the subsequent Security Council Resolution 1737. The resurfacing of international concerns over Iran’s nuclear program further strained relations with the GCC. Because of the threat they felt from Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric, they felt compelled to

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “Ahlan Va Sahlan Ya Akhi Ahmadinejad,” *Ebtekar*, December 4, 2007.

<sup>113</sup> 1. Establishment of economic cooperation organizations 2. Waving visas for the seven countries for increased interactions. 3. Permitting ownership of real estate. 4. Bilateral and multilateral joint ventures for the development of oil and gas resources. 5. Preparing the stages for the establishment of free trade between the seven countries. 6. Satisfy the water and gas needs of the Brother nations. 7. Reinvigorate the North-South Corridor. 8. Increase Tourism. 9. Collaboration in assisting Muslim and economically-weak countries. 10. Establishment of security cooperation organizations. 11. Educational, Scientific, technology, and research exchanges. 12. Cooperation in protecting the environment of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.

initiate their own nuclear programs. Furthermore, with the increasing tensions between the Islamic Republic and the United States and the majority of the international community, Ahmadinejad forced Iran back into isolation, and further fueled the regional contentions with the GCC countries.

Despite the sharp increase in oil prices during Ahmadinejad's presidency, who assumed office "during a period of unprecedented prosperity in Iran," according to Maloney, the economy "cratered under his volatile stewardship," and "many of the modest improvements in the social and political atmosphere effected during the Khatami presidency" were "undone."<sup>114</sup> This led to severe economic hardships for the majority of the Iranian people, including those who supported Ahmadinejad in the elections. Additionally, the unilateral sanctions by the United States and European Union, and the multilateral sanctions through the United Nations Security Council triggered popular dissent in the Islamic Republic, and once again brought about the need for reforms and recalibration of the Iranian negotiating strategy. According to Maloney, Hassan Rouhani's surprising rhetoric and victory during the 2013 presidential elections stemmed from his disapproval of Ahmadinejad's policies, as well as his background as the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council until 2005.<sup>115</sup> Maloney writes that "as Rafsanjani's understudy, Rouhani is a quintessential creation of Iran's post-revolutionary order," which brought back realism and prudence to Iranian policy formation.<sup>116</sup>

Similarly, Sen refers to Rouhani's approach as having a "pragmatist tone with constant emphasis on realism and prudence."<sup>117</sup> The Rouhani administration not only succeeded at ending

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<sup>114</sup> Maloney, "Iran Surprises"

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Sen, "Constructive Engagement"

Iran's nuclear portfolio at the Security Council which led to the lifting of international sanctions on Iran, but in doing so, his team managed to once again reduce Iran's isolation while fostering unprecedented engagement with the international community. Molavi argues that President Rouhani "made outreach to the Gulf states a priority," and that his administration "hails from the Rafsanjani camp that believes in pragmatic engagement with Gulf Arab states, not confrontation."<sup>118</sup> However, the growing regional contentions have inhibited the betterment of relations with the GCC countries due to the growing involvement of most Persian Gulf countries in regional conflicts. The Syrian and Yemeni conflicts are major arenas for confrontation between Iran and the GCC, and coupled with the shift in regional dynamics arising from JCPOA, the Rouhani administration was unable to remove the hostilities from bilateral and multilateral relations.

Nevertheless, President Rouhani continued his outreach to the GCC countries, and as Bianco asserts, his administration "has been trying to exploit the economic opportunities offered by the prospect of sanctions lifting as an incentive to strengthen ties with GCC members" and has initiated "far more ambitious talks with them."<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, Bianco also argues that the GCC countries "hold no unified position vis-à-vis Iran," and due to GCC monarchies' "unique geopolitical challenges, internal dynamics, and history with Iran," the prospect of a sustainable rapprochement in relations has received "a broad range of reactions from rulers in Manama, Kuwait City, Muscat, Doha, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi."<sup>120</sup> Rouhani has promoted the shared interests that exist between Iran and the GCC countries, and attempted to strengthen

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<sup>118</sup> Molavi, "Gulf States"

<sup>119</sup> Cinzia Bianco, "GCC-Iran Relations in the Wake of Strategic Shifts in the Gulf," *Gulf State Analytics*, January 2015.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

bilateral relations with the neighboring states following the start of intensified nuclear negotiations in 2013.

Mohammad Javad Zarif's rarely witnessed approach in Iranian foreign policy once again brought about the hopes for better, stronger, and more durable relations with the GCC countries. Soon after assuming his roles as the foreign minister, Zarif traveled to all countries surrounding the Persian Gulf, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and according to Osiewicz, "it was a clear sign that he attached great importance to reconciliation in the region."<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, Osiewicz argues that the "initiatives and activities undertaken by the Rouhani Administration are very positive and should be perceived as indications of the new regional policy of Iran."<sup>122</sup> Even though many challenges remain, the Rouhani administration's positive overtures to the GCC have led to do the re-consideration of Iran's resubmitted proposals, for dialogue and cooperation, by the Arab monarchies, evident by the series of interactions in early 2017.<sup>123</sup>

The varying approaches by the four presidents since 1989 clearly illustrate the importance of a leader centric approach in the foreign policy making of the Islamic Republic. While the Supreme Leader's power and influence is indisputable, the executive branch encompasses the necessary leeway in formulating policies.

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<sup>121</sup> Przemysław Osiewicz, "The Iranian Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf Under the Rule of President Hassan Rouhani: Continuity or Change?" *Przegląd Strategiczny* 7, (2014)

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> A detailed recount of President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif's diplomatic outreach toward the Arab states of the Persian Gulf is discussed in Chapter 3.



## Conclusion

Looking at Iran's foreign policy objectives and determinants through the three approaches of ideology, critical events, and leader-centric, provides a relatively comprehensive analysis of the Islamic Republic's policy and decision making in the Persian Gulf, as well as towards the GCC countries in particular. While ideology, in specific, revolutionary ideology, is an inherent aspect of Iranian policy formulation, the critical events, namely the Iran-Iraq War, the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the Arab uprisings, illustrate the influence and impact of the geopolitical shifts in the Persian Gulf on Iran's relations with the GCC countries. The analysis, however, is incomplete without realizing the differences that exist in foreign policies of the various leaders and presidents who greatly differ in their approach towards the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

With the intention of expanding the analysis of Iran's bilateral relationships with the GCC countries, the following chapter differentiates these relationships to better explain the variance that exist in policy approaches.

## CHAPTER 2

### BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AND THE MEMBER STATES OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

The Prophet Mohammad engaged in conversation with his closest companions at a mosque when, unannounced, friend and follower Salman Farsi appears. Prophet Mohammad invites Salman Farsi, an ethnic Fars or Iranian, to join the group in prayer, a gesture of hospitality that is not well received by the others. Prophet Mohammad's companions do not hesitate to shout their objections: "Salman is a Farsi speaker and we are Arabs! He ought not sit in our group and or above us [in the assembly]. He must sit in a lower level of the room than us." Greatly upset, Prophet Mohammad reprimands his followers. "Being a Fars or an Arab," he exclaims, "is not a reason for thinking better or worse of a person. Neither color nor ethnicity makes one wiser."<sup>124</sup>

This story of the Prophet Mohammad, which is widely used in Iranian school textbooks, is one that Iranians rely on to justify their position in Islam and denounce the division of Muslims by ethnicity; this is in line with the principle policies of the Islamic Republic which disregards the differences in sects, nationalities, and geographical locations among Muslims. This overarching principle forms the foundation of Iran's approach towards each member of the GCC, where cultural, social, and economic ties are more important than the differences between Persians and Arabs, or the differences between the Shi'a and Sunni. This foreign policy varies with each member states of the GCC, which is essential in understanding the dynamics between neighboring countries and opportunities for future cooperation. This chapter summarizes key aspects of historic, economic, social, and political relations between the Islamic Republic and GCC states.

The Gulf Cooperation Council was established in 1981 in direct response to Iran's revolution, and after Saddam Hussein started the war with the Islamic Republic. As Sen contends, "the *raison d'être* of the GCC was defined in contradistinction to Iran's regional

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<sup>124</sup> Sherwin Malekzadeh, "What Iran's textbooks can teach about sectarianism and ancient hatred," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2016.

aspirations as much as it was shaped by Iraq's decision to invade Iran."<sup>125</sup> Thus, the principal target of this organization has been Iran since its inception, and the majority of joint efforts were to counteract the Islamic Republic in the 1980s. However, as a result of the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and the change of leadership in the Islamic Republic, a new era of positive bilateral relations was initiated that has lasted until now, for the most part. Aside from two main areas of joint concern presented through the GCC, the dispute over the three islands in the Persian Gulf and Iran's alleged interference in Bahrain, the Council has rarely illustrated a unified front against Iran. On the other hand, the GCC's close partnership with, and facilitation of the presence of the United States in the Persian Gulf, continues to be one of the most important concerns that Iran has repeatedly voiced. These predominant grievances by all sides will continue to hinder the enhancement of bilateral and multilateral relations. Even though all sides have managed to maintain the hostilities at a manageable level in the past nearly four decades, the risks of an escalated conflict have risen since 2016, and arguably, the bilateral relations between Iran and the GCC countries continues to be the most important barrier to perpetual conflict in the region.

According to Shahandeh and Warnaar, relations with Iran are one of the primary point of contention within the GCC itself, and as they argue, "important differences exist among the GCC monarchies when it comes to the political role of the GCC, as shown recently by the lack of response to calls for political union by Saudi Arabia."<sup>126</sup> The inner dynamics of the GCC are a positive factor for increased bilateral relations with Iran, while also serving as a deterrent to

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<sup>125</sup> Sen, "Constructive Engagement"

<sup>126</sup> Behzad Shahandeh and Maaïke Warnaar, "Prospects for Change in GCC-Iran Relations?" in *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests Over Historic Rivalry*, ed. by Maaïke Warnaar et al. (London: Gerlach Press, 2016)

perpetual conflict. For example, Oman's repeated opposition to a unified military force, Qatar's somewhat opposing regional policies to that of Saudi Arabia, the different political system in Kuwait, and the varying approaches toward Iran by the different emirates in the UAE, have curbed the policies that intend to isolate the Islamic Republic. The fact that relations between Iran and the GCC countries are not monolithic is important in understanding the variations in bilateral approaches. As Ambassador Wahba asserts, "it is a big mistake to look at the GCC countries and assume that they are all on the same page."<sup>127</sup> This chapter aims to identify these differences to shape the pathway for constructive cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf proposed in Chapter 4.

Initiating a new era in relations will not be possible if the sources of past and current tensions are not identified and rectified. Furthermore, in order to understand the complex dynamics of the region and achieve a sustainable platform for dialogue and cooperation, the positive attributes of bilateral relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors must be recognized. Keeping in mind that the analysis of each bilateral relation can be a separate study, this chapter aims to identify the main causes of antagonism and hostilities in the past, along with the positive factors and areas of mutual interest that can potentially enable constructive cooperation.

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<sup>127</sup> Wahba, "Interview"

### The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sultanate of Oman

Since 1970, Iran and Oman have had an outstanding political, economic, and military relationship, relative to other Arab states and Iran's foreign relations in general. Oman managed to maintain its amicable relationship after the Iranian revolution and during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, mediated the negotiations between Iran and the United States on the nuclear issue in 2013, and has increasingly illustrated its desire for reconciliation between Iran and GCC states. Oman's foreign policy largely stems from its geo-strategic role, its neutrality in regional and international conflicts, and positive relations with the international community. While the Oman-Iran relationship should be set as an ideal for other GCC states, Oman's unique political continuity and historic relations with Iran differentiates its policies from neighboring Arab states. Oman's close ties with Iran date back to the Dhofar Rebellion in the 1970s, when the Shah of Iran assisted Sultan Qabous in consolidating power through military means.<sup>128</sup> Close geographical proximity and shared access to the Strait of Hormoz only serve to highlight mutual interests, and as such bilateral cooperation has continuously grown over the past four decades.

Oman's strategic decision to continue friendly relations following the revolution, in spite of a close relationship with the Shah, exemplifies the country's peaceful and neutral foreign policy approach. It is important to consider both domestic and international factors when analyzing the foreign policy of the Persian Gulf States. The existence of multiple ethnicities and religious sects in the Omani society and their inclusion, whether Ibadi, Shi'a, Sunni, Balouch, Zanzebari, have prevented major domestic upheavals, and have established a national identity built on the Sultan's peaceful vision. Sultan Qabous' long reign of forty-seven years as the principle and sole policymaker responsible for the country's foreign relations is the primary reason for the success

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<sup>128</sup> Richard Schmierer, "The Sultanate of Oman and the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 4 (2015)

of the country's interactions with neighbors and global powers.<sup>129</sup> The Sultan's vision and calculated foreign policy have established Oman's geo-strategic legitimacy in the regional, and importance on the international stage.

In the spring of 2013, when there was little hope for a comprehensive deal over Iran's nuclear program, Oman hosted secret talks between mid-level Iranian and American envoys to discuss terms for a revitalized negotiation that recognizes Iran's right to enrichment, while ensuring the peaceful nature of the nuclear program. Both Minister Zarif and Secretary Kerry were briefed on these discussions before they assumed their positions, and these meetings gave birth to the framework for the Iran-P5+1 negotiations.<sup>130</sup> As the key mediator, Sultan Qabous leveraged his close ties with both countries to assist in settling a dispute that, some argue, was on a path to military confrontation.<sup>131</sup>

In multiple pre-negotiations trust building measures, Oman paid 1.5 million dollars in bail to release the American hikers that were detained in Iran since 2011. This was "an act of kindness recognized and thanked for by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton," Ma argues.<sup>132</sup> In exchange for the hikers, Oman helped back bring home Mojtaba Atarodi, an Iranian scientist arrested in Los Angeles on charges of "purchasing equipment for Tehran's nuclear program."<sup>133</sup> Such actions were essential for Oman to prove its mediation capability and capacity for success. This contribution to the nuclear negotiations did not go unnoticed by Iran, and Sultan Qabous

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<sup>129</sup> Aside from the Head of State, Sultan Qabous is also officially the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Yusuf Bin Alawi is Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs since 1997.

<sup>130</sup> Javad Zarif, as Iran's Representative to the United Nations, was involved with the nuclear negotiations since its start in 2003, and John Kerry as Senator and the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee was involved in the decision-making process with President Obama and Secretary Clinton to hold the secret talks in Oman.

<sup>131</sup> Sen, "Constructive Engagement"

<sup>132</sup> Andrew Ma, "The Omani Backdoor," *Harvard International Review* (2014)

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

became the first foreign official to visit the country after the inauguration of Hassan Rouhani in August 2013.<sup>134</sup> Oman continued to host secret talks on five future occasions, until both sides met officially in September 2013.<sup>135</sup>

The mediation efforts by Sultan Qabous also entailed a calculated balancing act to encourage support for the negotiations from neighboring Arab states and other concerned members of the international community. As Ma asserts, “Oman played a critical role in sealing the deal with the Iranian administration, as well as helping the Obama administration warm the cold feet of other Arab governments critical of the deal.”<sup>136</sup> Sultan Qabous was, during the time of negotiations, and continues to be, a key figure in assisting the resolution of minor and major contentions between the other GCC partners and the Islamic Republic. “Oman sees itself as the mediator and has always kept that role,” the former U.S. Ambassador to the UAE, Marcelle Wahba, contends; arguing that “I think the other GCC countries, while they may not always agree with Oman’s approach, on several occasions they have welcomed the fact that one of the countries in the GCC has that capacity and role to play.”<sup>137</sup> Oman’s role is also viewed positively by the GCC which is an advantage that facilitates the meditation phase between Iran and the other Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Such a geo-strategic position is both beneficial for Iran and the other members of the GCC, and Oman’s proven track record of conflict mediation is an asset and an important factor for future dialogue between the Islamic Republic and its Arab neighbors.

However, other GCC countries do not always agree with Oman’s approach. As Barrett argues about the events during the 1970s, “The presence of Iranian/Persian Shi’a troops and air

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<sup>134</sup> Schmierer, “Oman”

<sup>135</sup> Michael Crowley et al., “Obama’s Iran Gamble,” *Time*, September 12, 2013.

<sup>136</sup> Ma, “Omani Backdoor”

<sup>137</sup> Wahba, “Interview”

units in Oman alarmed Riyadh.<sup>138</sup> A glance at the inner dynamics of, and frictions between, Arab states in 1970s with respect to the Shah of Iran, Barrett further argues that “strategically, hardly anything could be worse in Saudi Arabia’s view than a Gulf Arab state seeking security through a relationship with Iran and the presence of Iranian troops on the Peninsula.”<sup>139</sup> While the military cooperation between Iran and Oman is confined to tackling drug trafficking and combatting terrorism and piracy, the political and economic relations have sharply increased ever since, forcing the acceptance of Oman’s relations with the Islamic Republic by its GCC partners.

Oman has acted as a barrier to a unified anti-Iran stance by the GCC. For example, Oman was the major hurdle in 2013 when Saudi Arabia sought a unified GCC military to augment “the Peninsula Shield agreement.”<sup>140</sup> These discussions came around the same time as Oman publicized its role as the mediator, and just two months after the official interim nuclear agreement was signed between Iran and the P5+1. Furthermore, during this time period, the Omani Minister Responsible for Defense Affairs and his Iranian counterpart signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defense cooperation.<sup>141</sup> While this agreement primarily tackled drug and human trafficking, it serves as a foundation for further military cooperation. As Iran’s Defense Minister, Hossein Dehghan stated, “the Iran-Oman defense relations could serve as a role model for constructive and fruitful ties,” expressing that “both countries should work to make other regional countries adopt similar policies.” Indeed, contingent on its success, the

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<sup>138</sup> Roby Barrett, *Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past* (McDill, FL: Joint Special Operations University, August 2011)

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Dahlia Kholaiif, “Oman: No Gulf Wide Union for Us,” *Al Jazeera*, December 15, 2013.

<sup>141</sup> “Oman, Iran join to tackle drugs, trafficking,” *Gulf News*, September 18, 2013.



collaboration between the two nations can serve as an example for improved bilateral and multilateral relations with other GCC countries.

One of the most significant geo-strategic aspects of this relationship is the shared use of the Strait of Hormoz, which while serving as a rationale for maintaining friendly ties, is also used as a contingent factor that can also potentially damage relations. Iran's repeated attestation of its capability to close the Strait puts pressure on the relationship. However, it was announced that there is a proposed causeway connecting Iran to Oman via the Strait, which decrease the chances of an escalated conflict.<sup>142</sup> The Omani territory under consideration is separated from the mainland by the UAE. Due to the fact that this will be the first and only direct connection between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, it is doubtlessly a cause of concern for both UAE and Saudi Arabia. If taken advantage of the benefits it can potentially offer by other countries in the region, this can potentially enhance multilateral cooperation, as well as reduce the possibility of Iran closing the Strait in the event of a conflict in the Persian Gulf.

While diplomatic, political, and military relations are the bedrock of interactions between Iran and Oman, economic relations also play a major role. The proposed subsea Iran-Oman gas pipeline, estimated to be worth up to 60 billion dollars in twenty-five years, is an added factor in the sustainability of the relationship.<sup>143</sup> This pipeline is closely linked to the Iran-Afghanistan-India Chabahar port project in the Gulf of Oman, which will serve as the point of origin for the pipeline. Furthermore, the pipeline is also worthy of attention because it will reach the Gujarat state in India. India's vested interest is a significant motivator for completing the pipeline project for both Iran and Oman, as India intends to overcome the rising challenges by Pakistan as well as

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<sup>142</sup> "Oman-Iran plan causeway over Hormuz," *Gulf News*, March 6, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran, Oman reaffirm gas export project, change pipeline route to avoid UAE," *Reuters*, February 8, 2017.

counter the Chinese-supported pipelines from Iran to Pakistan.<sup>144</sup> In addition, the Iran-Oman pipeline has the capacity and potential to expand and allow access to other GCC countries.

On February 7, 2017, Iran and Oman reaffirmed their commitment to the project by signing a Memorandum of Understanding between the oil ministers of both countries. According to a report, representatives from the “French oil and gas giant Total S.A., Royal Dutch Shell, German energy company Uniper SE, Japan's Mitsui and Korea Gas Corporation,” are in talks with both governments to propose a plan.<sup>145</sup> These competitive regional dynamics, the demand for natural gas by Oman, India, and other GCC countries, as well as Iran’s urgent need to develop and export its natural gas, increase the importance of constructing the pipeline. This will further ensure a sustained relationship between Iran and Oman, defusing the risks from the uncertainty in the future of the Sultanate after Sultan Qabous.

After signing a new Memorandum of Understanding on banking and trade cooperation in March 2017, Oman’s Foreign Minister, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah reaffirmed Oman’s continued efforts to normalize Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, as well as the entire international community. “Cooperation with Iran will open new horizons for us, which is establishing regional peace and security. We would like to get this done and show it to the rest of the region that they can cooperate with each other. This trip helped us see our theory in practice,”<sup>146</sup> he added. In another case, Oman assisted Canada in obtaining the release of Homa Hoodfar, an Iranian-Canadian academic imprisoned in Tehran.<sup>147</sup> Oman has been in charge of

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<sup>144</sup> Vinay Kaura, “India and Iran: Challenges and Opportunity,” *The Diplomat*, September 11, 2015.

<sup>145</sup> “Iran, Oman Sign Preliminary Agreement on Gas Export,” *Financial Tribune*, February 8, 2017.

<sup>146</sup> “Iran, Oman Ink Banking MoU,” *Fars News*, March 12, 2017.

<sup>147</sup> David Cochrane, “Private meeting at UN between Trudeau team and Omani officials led to Hoodfar's release by Iran,” *CBC News (Canada)*, September 27, 2016.

representing Canadian interests in Tehran since diplomatic ties between Iran and Canada were severed in 2012. Alawi's close involvement in all mediating efforts and his role as an advisor and confidant to the Sultan further alleviates risks associated with the uncertain future of the country's international affairs in the near future.

The Sultanate's neutral stance, which has sometimes been seen as pro-Iran, could have sparked tensions with GCC partners in the past four decades. However, Oman's neutrality in its bilateral relations has prevented any conflict with neighboring Arab states. Oman reacted neutrally, for example, in the aftermath of the execution of Sheikh Nimr and the storming of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, when Saudi Arabia expected a strong retort. While this sparked some anger, it quickly deescalated since it was in line with Oman's previous policies. As Ambassador Wahba argues, Oman's close relations with Iran "has been useful" to other GCC countries.<sup>148</sup> At a time when regional tensions are at an all-time high, Omani efforts to pave the way for an urgently needed Persian Gulf dialogue are increasingly appealing to both Iran and other GCC States.

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<sup>148</sup> Wahba, "Interview"

### The Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Arab Emirates

Iran and the UAE have had mostly positive relations since the establishment of the Emirates in 1971. In the past four decades, trade relations and the existence of Iranian expatriates in the UAE have exponentially grown, despite the protracted dispute over three islands in the Persian Gulf that continue to be a focal point for animosity and contentions. Aside from mutual interests, the most important reason for this constructive relationship is the fact that the UAE has a federal system where the seven emirates are somewhat independent in their policies. This explains the difference between the very cooperative relationship between Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras Al Kheima, and Iran on one hand, and Abu Dhabi's competitive approach towards the Islamic Republic on the other. This dynamic has proved to be a positive factor in the bilateral relations as it has allowed flexibility and differentiation of interest, especially since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988.

The difference in approaches between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the two strongest emirates, towards Iran is based on historic ties, the size of the Iranian community, and most importantly, economic interests. While during the Iran-Iraq War, for example, Abu Dhabi was financially supporting Iraq, Dubai and the other emirates continued their historic trading relations and social interactions with Iran.<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, Dubai hosts one of the largest Iranian diasporas, and the largest among the GCC states. At least 400,000 Iranians live in Dubai alone, and largest Iranian school abroad is situated in this city.<sup>150</sup> The diaspora consists of non-citizens who have immigrated following Iran's revolution, Iranian businesses and organizations who mostly invested in Dubai since the early 1990s, as well as local Arabs with Iranian heritage who have

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<sup>149</sup> Fatemeh Shayan, "Geopolitical Subjectivity in Iran-GCC Relations: The Three Islands Issue Since 1979," *Geopolitics* 18 (2013)

<sup>150</sup> Hasan Al Mustafa, "UAE, Iran slowly rebuild trust," *Al Monitor*, April 28, 2014.

resettled in the past two hundred years or more. It is not only economic interests and religious connections that augment the importance of Iran-UAE relations, but that Iranians and local Arabs with Iranian ancestry are intertwined with the social fabric of the Emirates.

Nevertheless, economic interests are primary motivators for both countries' leaderships and a main inhibitor of an escalated conflict. During the crippling economic sanctions on Iran, starting in 2006, Dubai assisted the Islamic Republic as the major re-export hub for Iranian destined and originated goods. As argued by Ambassador Sohrabi, the former Iranian Ambassador to the Qatar, "because of the social, economic relations with the UAE, as well as the longstanding international sanctions on Iran, the UAE became a transit for Iranian sourced or destined goods."<sup>151</sup> Much of the Iranian imports, and many of the Iranian businesses relied on the transit of goods from the UAE ports. According to the UAE Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, the volume of trade exchange between Iran and the UAE "amounted to more than twelve billion dollars per year," before the new round of tougher international sanctions in 2012 that resulted in a sharp decline to approximately 6.8 billion dollars in annual trade ever since.<sup>152</sup> Until the sanctions started to hit, Iran was the UAE's number one trading partner, and the Islamic Republic's trade with the UAE accounting for more than eighty percent of Iran's total trade with the GCC States.<sup>153</sup> The Emirates also paid a price for shunning the international sanctions, and from 2010 to 2013, multiple UAE based shipping firms were fined and sanctioned by the United States as a result of not adhering to the regulations.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Al Mustafa, "Rebuild Trust"

<sup>153</sup> Isaac John, "Boost for UAE-Iran trade," *The Khaleej Times*, July 15, 2015.

<sup>154</sup> Office of Foreign Assets Control, *An Overview of OFAC Regulations involving Sanctions on Iran*, 2012

With the prospects of reaching an agreement over the Iranian nuclear program closer than ever before, the UAE Foreign Minister paid a visit to Tehran on November 28, 2013, four days after the interim agreement was signed between Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva. During his remarks he described Iran as a “strategic partner” and acknowledged that the bilateral relationship “was not limited to trade and economic affairs, but transcended those to include cultural common bonds.”<sup>155</sup> In return, Zarif visited the UAE on December 2013 as well as April 2014 when he met with the UAE President and Vice-President respectively.<sup>156</sup>

The economic aspect is overwhelmingly important for both countries, as an Abu Dhabi based economist argued that with the lifting of sanctions as part of the JCPOA, “the UAE can expect a broad-based rise in Iran’s imports,” including machinery, vehicles, construction related goods, commodities, particularly iron and steel, food, and consumer goods.”<sup>157</sup> The JCPOA can reinstate UAE’s position as a key strategic trading partner with the Islamic Republic and with Iranian businesses. Furthermore, commercial and business proposals on hold since 2012 can now be implemented, and both countries can reap the benefits from the vast new opportunities for further economic cooperation. Rotana, one of the UAE’s largest hotel brands, started construction in Tehran and Mashhad in 2012, even before the final set of nuclear negotiations.<sup>158</sup> After a brief hold due to the intentional sanctions, Rotana in Mashhad is scheduled to officially open in the Fall of 2017. The contract was among the first to be signed with a foreign hotel brand since the 1979 revolution, and is a sign for deeper economic ties to come.

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<sup>155</sup> Al Mustafa, “Rebuild Trust”

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Babu Das Augustine, “Sanctions-free Iran a positive development for UAE economy,” *Gulf News*, January 17, 2016.

<sup>158</sup> Louise Birchall, “Rotana inks deal for three hotels in Iran,” *Arabian Business*, December 6, 2012

UAE investments in Iran's leisure and tourism is of great importance, due to the Emirates' experience with hospitality management and success in its international tourism industry. Aside from the construction of hotels, the UAE can invest in Iran's transportation infrastructure as well as the Iranian tourism sector. Iran aims to become a Halal Destination, where all elements of touristic activities exist within the bounds of Islamic principles. To achieve this objective, serious infrastructure development is required, and the multiple UAE based companies are well-suited for these projects in the post-JCPOA Iran.

Another lucrative area for cooperation is investments in Iran's oil and gas sectors as well as the construction of a gas pipeline. According to Seznec's research, there is a gas pipeline that goes through an Iranian field near the maritime border with Ras Al Kheimah which has the potential to easily transfer gas from Iran to the UAE.<sup>159</sup> Taking advantage of this proximity to satisfy the gas needs of the Emirates as well as establishing a long-term bilateral joint venture is undoubtedly an additional positive factor for the future of relations between the two countries.

These strong economic, cultural, and historic ties between Iran and the UAE have allowed the Emirates to adopt a two-pronged approach in their policy toward Iran; one that aims to increase these ties, and the other political approach which is based on the disputed islands in the Persian Gulf. The longstanding dispute between Iran and the UAE over the three islands of Greater Tonb, Lesser Tonb, and Abu Mousa, date back to the days before the establishment of the UAE as an independent country as Britain completed its withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in November 1971. In regard to the claims over the Persian Gulf islands, the British mediated a Memorandum of Understanding on Abu Mousa between Iran and the Emirate of Sharjah. The agreement divided the islands' resources between Iran and the Emirate, and gave shared

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<sup>159</sup> Jean-François Seznec, *Sharing a Pot of Gold* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, August 2016)

administration of the islands; the UAE was allowed to have police forces on the southern shores of the islands, and Iran was allowed to position armed forces and military equipment in the north.<sup>160</sup>

At the same time, the two Tonbs were also pledged to Iran by the Emir of Ras Al Kheimah, who is the official claimant of the islands, “in return for military and humanitarian support from Iran.”<sup>161</sup> However, the Emirati narrative generally explains that, the Shah of Iran took over the three islands before finalizing the agreement on November 30, 1971, a day before the British departed.<sup>162</sup> Alternatively, the common Iranian narrative says that the Shah had a ‘gentlemen's agreement’ with the United Kingdom, whereby Iran retrieved its occupied islands in return for its acquiescence to Bahrain's independence.”<sup>163</sup>

The importance of these very small islands in the Persian Gulf relates to their geo-strategic position and proximity to the Strait of Hormoz, and the vast, mostly untouched, natural resources in their surroundings. Abu Mousa has less than two thousand residents in an area of four square miles, mostly comprising Iranian military personnel and local Iranian Arabs. Most of the island’s infrastructure, including roads, schools, and a university, have been built by Iran, and the Governor of Abu Mousa is Iranian.<sup>164</sup> The smaller nearby islands, the Greater and Lesser Tonbs are inhabited, but both have importance for the two countries.<sup>165</sup> While the UAE leaders have continuously repeated their entitlement over the islands, Iran has disregarded the

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<sup>160</sup> Shayan, “Geopolitical Subjectivity”

<sup>161</sup> Kosar Jahani, “Sanctioning Iran: The View from the United Arab Emirates,” *The Fletcher School Online Journal for Issues Related to Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization*, Spring 2011.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Nima Khorrami Asl, “Will UAE and Iran resolve the three islands dispute?” *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2012.

<sup>164</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, “A Tiny Island Is Where Iran Makes a Stand,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Shayan, “Geopolitical Subjectivity”



protestations as illegitimate claims. The two countries continued to share the administration of Abu Mousa, until 1992. Following the Persian Gulf War and the accompanied increase in United States presence, in a spontaneous but a strategically calculated move, Iran removed the seven hundred Emiratis from the island, and asserted total claim over Abu Mousa.<sup>166</sup> This led to the restart of tensions not only between the Islamic Republic and the Emirates, but also with other GCC member states due to their long-standing support for the UAE in this regard.

While President Khatami engaged in discussions over the islands with the UAE officials, the negotiations did not continue during the following administration. Ahmadinejad visited Abu Dhabi and Dubai on May 13, 2007, to meet with the leaders of the UAE as well to tour Dubai and give a speech to Iranian expats at the Iranian social club.<sup>167</sup> However, in another surprising move, Ahmadinejad made a rare visit to Abu Mousa on April 11, 2012, a first by an Iranian President.<sup>168</sup> This action, a year before the end of his second term as President, came at a time when the toughest sanctions legislation was imposed on the Islamic Republic. The trip boosted his support in Iran, even amongst those who did not agree with his policies, as the Persian Gulf's name and all it encompasses are at the heart of Iranian nationalism.

According to Erdbrink, "For Iranians, whose country's borders have shrunk in the past two-hundred years after wars and unfavorable deals by corrupt shahs, territorial issues are a delicate matter. So, a renewed claim by the UAE to the tiny island of Abu Mousa in the Persian Gulf has touched a raw nerve."<sup>169</sup> In response, the UAE recalled its Ambassador from Iran the next day, and initiated the internationalization of the dispute. Ahmadinejad's actions were

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<sup>166</sup> Youssef Ibrahim, "Iran Is Said to Expel Arabs from Gulf Island," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1992.

<sup>167</sup> "Ahmadinejad Well Received In UAE," *Gulf News*, May 13, 2007.

<sup>168</sup> Erdbrink, "Tiny Island"

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

another provocation in the eyes of the Emiratis, and Abu Dhabi changed its strategy “by seeking to internationalize the dispute, thereby using Tehran's distorted international image to gain more backing for its efforts,” Khorrami Asl argues.<sup>170</sup> With regard to the dispute, Ambassador Wahba argues the UAE narrative as holding a “long held grievance against Iran for the occupation, as they see it, of the islands,” explaining that <sup>171</sup>

The UAE has repeatedly stated its desire for arbitration by the International Court of justice, and that they want an unbiased body to look at the two sides' positions, and they would accept the ruling of the court, but Iran has refused to do that. So they hold that grievance very much close to their heart when they think about will Iran show some flexibility, will Iran be willing to meet them half way. That is one of the areas that they find very difficult to accept.<sup>172</sup>

In his 2016 address to the UN General Assembly, Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed stated his country's concerns regarding Iran, with a clear change of tone and approach: “We find Iran, with its expansionist regional policies, flagrant violations of the principles of sovereignty, and constant interference in the internal affairs of its neighboring countries, has played the greatest role in causing tension and instability in the region.”<sup>173</sup> This official declaration of open hostility with the Islamic Republic has rarely been stated by UAE officials in the past, and arguably, the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia in January of that year played a key role in the new policy formulation of the Emirates. Sheikh bin Zayed once again brought the dispute over the three islands on the international stage, and restated at the General Assembly:

The crises of our region should not distract us from our core national issue which is the sovereignty of the UAE over its three islands: Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Mousa, which are occupied by Iran against the provisions of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. My country has called, and continues to call on, our

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<sup>170</sup> Khorrami Asl, “Islands Dispute”

<sup>171</sup> Wahba, “Interview”

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Statement by Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed at the United Nations General Assembly. *New York, United States*. September 24, 2016

neighbor Iran, to return the occupied islands to their rightful owners either voluntarily or through peaceful means, particularly through international justice or arbitration, in order to maintain friendly relations and good neighborliness in the ‘Arabian Gulf’ region. We also affirm that my country will never give up its sovereign right over these islands, and this approach emphasizes the UAE’s insistence on the principles of international law.<sup>174</sup>

UAE’s timely decision to use the recent conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia to once again pressure the Islamic Republic into negotiation over the three island has cemented the resolution of this issue as a prerequisite for a wider dialogue and cooperation. Even though Iran has illustrated that it will not capitulate to these demands, there is a possibility of resolving the issue based on the Khatami era initiative that might include a 49 percent share for the UAE in the islands’ oil revenues without relinquishing rights over the territories.<sup>175</sup>

Due to the close alignment of Abu Dhabi with Saudi Arabia and stronger shared ties between the two governments, the UAE officials have also reiterated the rhetoric by the Saudi and Bahraini government, blaming Iran for the Islamic Republic’s involvement in Yemen, as well as accusing Iran for destabilizing the region and promoting sectarianism. The UAE Ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, has been one of the loudest and harshest critics of Iran, amongst the GCC countries, and had at one point suggested military action, which was immediately rejected by the country’s Foreign Ministry.<sup>176</sup> Al Otaiba penned an article in the Wall Street Journal on March 2, 2017, titled “The Gulf States Are Ready for Peaceful Coexistence—if Iran Is” with a subtitle “With Washington now alert to the threat, we welcome greater U.S. engagement in the region.”<sup>177</sup> He praised the Trump administration for the imposition of new sanctions against Iran’s ballistic missile program calling it “a measured

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Shayan, “Geopolitical Subjectivity”

<sup>176</sup> Ian Black, “UAE Ambassador backs strike on Iran’s nuclear sites,” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2010.

<sup>177</sup> Youssef Al Otaiba, “The Gulf States Are Ready for Peaceful Coexistence—if Iran Is,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2017.

reaction —long overdue and welcomed by all of America’s friends in the region.”<sup>178</sup> In an effort to further advance relations with Washington, Al Otaiba argues for “a renewed security partnership with the U.S., which would provide the basis for a collective and firm response to the Islamic Republic’s provocations.”<sup>179</sup> Al Otaiba, on the other hand, also mentioned the January 2017 GCC proposal that was sent to Iran via the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister, further saying:

“The U.A.E. and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council believe that engagement can achieve a long-term solution. In January the council proposed a direct strategic dialogue with Iran, resting on three principles: noninterference in other countries’ domestic affairs, a halt to exporting the revolution, and a commitment to reducing Sunni-Shiite sectarianism... We will persist in trying to convince Iranian leaders that peaceful coexistence is possible. The upside would be immense—greater trade and economic opportunities, expanded cultural exchanges, and an Iran that can assume its rightful place in the global community. The nuclear deal could have been a first step toward this future.”<sup>180</sup>

This opinion piece by Ambassador Al Otaiba is an extreme rendering of the UAE’s two-pronged approach, where political issues are separate from economic interests. Rather than adopting the UAE Ambassador’s immoderate position, the leaders in Abu Dhabi and Dubai have prioritized the high level of economic relations with Iran. This is further evident the Emirates’ calculated decision to officially support the nuclear negotiations and the JCPOA, and also to merely downgrade the level of diplomatic presence in Iran to a charge d’affaires following the attacks on Saudi Arabia’s diplomatic offices in Tehran and Mashhad.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Celine Malek, “UAE recalls ambassador to Iran,” *The National*, January 4, 2016.

### The Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Qatar

The relationship between Iran and Qatar has one unique feature that has bound the two countries together: shared gas resources in the Persian Gulf. As a result of this natural resource linkage, both countries have developed strategic partnerships and mostly accommodating relations. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War interactions between the two have gradually increased, and since Khatami's official trip to Doha in May 1999, relations have mostly been positive.<sup>182</sup> Qatar's independent approach is "a combination of opportunism, ambition and strategic maneuvering, backed by tremendous economic power and a willingness to use it for political purposes." This approach in foreign policy has made Qatar a unique member of the GCC with respect to Iran.<sup>183</sup>

Ahmadinejad was invited to the GCC summit in Doha, as the first foreign leader, and during his remarks on December 3, 2007, he proposed twelve points for improving brotherly relations and expanding cooperation between the seven countries.<sup>184</sup> As a result of the increased political exchanges, according to Iran's former Ambassador to Qatar, Abdullah Sohrabi, Iran and Qatar forged official partnership in a wider range of areas in 2010, including maritime security cooperation, joint efforts to fight piracy and terrorism, and coordination in countering organized crimes, specifically drug trafficking.<sup>185</sup> The strategic relations between Iran and Qatar were further strengthened with the election of Hassan Rouhani and the subsequent series of diplomatic visits by Foreign Minister Zarif in 2013, 2015, and 2017. The strategic importance of Qatar to President Rouhani's foreign policy was illustrated in October 2015 when Iran and Qatar signed a

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<sup>182</sup> Eltahawy, "Olive Branch"

<sup>183</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (2015)

<sup>184</sup> "Ahlan Va Sahlan"

<sup>185</sup> Sohrabi, "Interview"

security agreement for the stability of the regional waters in the Persian Gulf as well as when Iran trained Qatari naval forces.<sup>186</sup> This was at the time of intense frictions within the GCC, illustrative of Qatar's strategic maneuvering in regional politics.

The mutual beneficial relations between the Islamic Republic and Qatar have inhibited the escalation of tensions over regional issues, and Qatar's welcoming of the nuclear deal was a sign of a calculated approach towards Iran's diplomatic success. Among the first GCC leaders praising the JCPOA, the Emir of Qatar called the JCPOA a positive and important step at the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015, and remarked: "I assure that Iran is an important neighbor country, and that cooperation between it and our countries is in the interest of the region."<sup>187</sup> Further claiming that "bilateral relations between Qatar and Iran are growing and evolving steadily on the basis of common interests and good neighborliness. There is no dispute concerning bilateral relations between our two countries."<sup>188</sup> The Emir's remarks also included his country's readiness to resolve the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia through hosting a "dialogue" in Qatar, saying: "It is time to conduct a meaningful dialogue of this kind between countries that will always remain neighbors."<sup>189</sup>

These remarks provide insight in the Qatari leadership's calculated decision to welcome and embrace the Islamic Republic following the lifting of international sanctions. However, Qatar has to also keep in mind the internal dynamics of the GCC. Kirkpatrick argues that "Qatar

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<sup>186</sup> Ali Mamouri, "Is Qatar Iran's door to the Gulf?" *Al Monitor*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>187</sup> Statement by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani at the United Nations General Assembly. *New York, United States*. September 28, 2015

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

views Iran as a manageable concern, while Saudi Arabia sees it as an existential danger.”<sup>190</sup> The Iranian perception of these dynamics says that while there are many mutual interests between Iran and Qatar, the Qatari government was forced to adopt policies in line with the West and Saudi Arabia, evident by the presence of the U.S. airbase and coordinated anti-Iran actions with Saudi Arabia since January 2016.<sup>191</sup> However, even though Qatar shares a land border with Saudi Arabia, with whom it has many religious commonalities, it “shares its wealth with Iran.”<sup>192</sup> To manage this role and when the regional environment demands such strategic decisions, Qatar has used its economic relations with Iran to allow more political cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

In 2014, for example, Qatar’s complicated relationship with Saudi Arabia in the previous year also had a great impact on GCC unity. Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain, and the UAE, recalled their ambassadors from Doha to protest Qatar’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations, as well as its rising influence in international media through the Al Jazeera network.<sup>193</sup> Even though this inner GCC conflict was resolved in less than a year, Qatar, along with Oman and Kuwait have shown the least desire for further GCC unification, especially against the Islamic Republic.

While Qatar recalled its ambassador from Tehran following the Saudi termination of ties with Iran, the Qatari government has maintained a strategic balance in its relations with both Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic. The downgrading of diplomatic relations with Iran has

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<sup>190</sup> David Kirkpatrick, “3 Gulf Countries Pull Ambassadors From Qatar Over Its Support of Islamists,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2014.

<sup>191</sup> Sohrabi, “Interview”

<sup>192</sup> Sez nec, “Pot of Gold”

<sup>193</sup> Kirkpatrick, “Pull Ambassadors”

clearly damaged relations and further weakened the chances for a wider GCC-Iran rapprochement. However, the continuation of the will by Qatar as well as Oman and Kuwait, to mediate and resolve the regional contentions strengthens the chances for more cooperative bilateral and multilateral relations in the future.

Iran holds the largest natural gas reserves in the world. Half of those reserves are situated in the world's largest gas field that Iran shares with Qatar, which holds an estimated thirty-five trillion cubic meters of Iranian and twenty-four trillion cubic meters of Qatari reserves.<sup>194</sup> Qatar started production from its North Dome fields in 1989, eighteen years after their discovery, and Iran discovered and established its South Pars field in 1990, starting production another twelve years later in 2002.<sup>195</sup> This relatively new source of natural wealth has allowed Qatar with its population of less than three hundred thousand to sign joint ventures and production sharing agreements with major oil corporations. Since only small fraction of the gas it extracts from the North Dome are used for domestic purposes, the majority are transformed into Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) and exported around the world. On the other hand, decades of sanctions on Iran inhibited Iran from equally taking advantage of these resources. The long-standing sanctions on Iranian oil and gas forced the country to adopt a nationalist approach that utilizes the Iranian population in its infrastructure development, while at the same time using large portions of extracted gas for domestic usage; minimizing profits.

South Pars which holds around 7.5 percent of the world's natural gas and half of Iran's total reserves, however, has failed to take advantage of its full potential.<sup>196</sup> Meanwhile, through partnerships and contracts with major oil and gas corporations such as Exxon, Shell, and Total,

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<sup>194</sup> Seznec, "Pot of Gold"

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Charles Kennedy, "Iran signs old deal with Total, done in Euros," *OilPrice.com*, February 8, 2016.



who are among the few companies who possess the required technology and equipment to develop gas fields, Qatar has extracted twice times the amount Iran has extracted.<sup>197</sup> Following the removal of sanctions, Iran has increased its investments and development of its share of the field, including an agreement to construct pipelines to Oman and India from the Bushehr port.

While there are no official agreements between Iran and Qatar on the fields, the South Pars/North Dome fields are viewed as a shared interest rather than as a battleground for rivalry. Qatar's advancement in the development of the North Dome and its longer experience working with international corporations can be helpful to Iran as it endeavors to develop its fields. Thus, the advancement of cooperation in the shared gas field has the potential of further enhancing relations between the two countries. Qatar can share its experience with the Islamic Republic to not only ensure the sustainability, security, and safety of the fields but also to profit from the investments and partnerships.

As Iran started reentering the global markets, there was a sharp decline in oil and gas prices, as well as an abundance of natural gas through new markets such as the United States and Australia, preventing Iran from taking full advantage of the removal of sanctions.<sup>198</sup> However, as Seznec argues, the drop in oil and gas prices might be of advantage for the Islamic Republic: "Iran may, in fact, benefit from this decreased interest."<sup>199</sup> Mainly because Qatar's heavy investment in LNGs has not provided much rewards, and because Iran needs to use the current levels of produced natural gas for domestic purposes and as exports to neighboring countries. In this regard, Qatar as the largest LNG producer in the world, can be the primary source for Iran's

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<sup>197</sup> Seznec, "Pot of Gold"

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

development efforts. As Seznec proposes, “Qatar could toll Iranian South Pars natural gas into LNG for export worldwide.”<sup>200</sup>

The shared South Pars/North Dome gas fields is the primary force behind relations between Iran and Qatar, and the advancement of mutual interests in this area is the most feasible and profitable route for enhancing bilateral relations and securing constructive engagement. Iran and Qatar must be aware that the continuation of the new era of contentious relations since January 2016 has the potential to jeopardize the positive factors in the relationship, and can also lead to “substantial economic losses for both states,” according to Seznec.<sup>201</sup> As a source of prosperity, the shared gas field has deterred the escalation of disputes in the past and has proven to be an essential factor in the realization for cooperative relations in the future. Qatar must intensify its diplomatic actions in coordination with Oman and Kuwait, if the country is genuinely keen on restoring ties with Iran. In addition, it is crucial that the Islamic Republic engages in the mediation process with the three GCC countries that seeks to provide an unambiguous and realistic plan for a comprehensive resolution of the outstanding grievance and disputes between Iran and Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

### The Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Kuwait

The relations between Iran and Kuwait have existed long before Iran's revolution in 1979 and Kuwait's independence in 1961. For centuries, Iranian merchants and migrants relocated in the Persian Gulf region in what is today Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Estimates suggest between three hundred thousand to a third of the 1.3 million population of Kuwait consists of a Shi'a minority, who mostly have Iranian origins and have maintained, in most part, cordial relations with the ruling Al Sabah family in Kuwait, as well as trading relations with Iran.<sup>202</sup> While tensions between the two countries flared during the Iranian revolution when Kuwaiti Shi'a along with a number of Sunni political activists marched against the monarchy, then Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah traveled to Tehran in 1979 to congratulate Imam Khomeini on his victory.<sup>203</sup> The visit marked the first post-revolution visit by a Persian Gulf leader, and among the first visits by Arab leaders to Iran.

However, tensions once again surfaced during the Iran-Iraq War, primarily due to the fact that Kuwait happens to be located between the two countries. The Kuwaiti monarchy was forced to support Saddam Hussein and turn to the United States for protection, primarily due to the continuous Shi'a uprisings in Kuwait along with Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti oil fields and tankers in the Persian Gulf. The Kuwait government expanded their relationship with the United States, leading to increased presence by the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf and its protection of Kuwaiti ships to ensure the free flow of oil and the safety of the international waters. However, tensions between Iran and Kuwait faded following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

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<sup>202</sup> Ibrahim Al Marashi, "Shattering the myth about the Kuwaiti Shi'a," *Al Jazeera*, June 30, 2015.

<sup>203</sup> "Iranian President visit to Kuwait Wednesday ... continuation of strong relation," *Kuwait News Agency*, February 14, 2017.

Kuwait, along with other GCC partners, the United States, and dozens of other countries supported and provided military assistance to Saddam Hussein during the war against the Islamic Republic. Saddam Hussein's actions after the end of the war with Iran illustrated the need for reassessing geopolitical strategies and policies for the GCC countries, and the invasion of Kuwait paved the way for a constructively positive new era in relations between Arab states of the Persian Gulf, especially Kuwait, with Iran. Furthermore, in Kuwait, the suspicion of ties to Iran and disloyalty to the monarchy by the Shi'a population also faded as the Shi'a along with the Sunni Kuwaitis fought alongside one another against Iraq. Al Marashi argues, "Kuwaiti Shia of Iranian ancestry took part in the Kuwaiti resistance against Iraqi military forces, retaliating against Saddam Hussein's policies that had devastated both their ancestral homeland, Iran, and their current home, Kuwait."<sup>204</sup>

Iran and Kuwait gradually increased political, military, and economic relations in the 1990s which expanded to an even higher level of strategic cooperation beginning in 2003. With an official visit by then Foreign Minister Al Sabah to Tehran in January 2003, Iran and Kuwait signed multiple Memorandum of Understandings including those on a natural gas pipeline, export of Iranian clean water, and security coordination in the Persian Gulf.<sup>205</sup> The visit, during the Presidency of Khatami and just before the United States' military intervention in Iraq, also allowed the initiation of negotiations on the maritime dispute along the continental shelf in the Persian Gulf which holds the Arash/Dorra shared gas fields between Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>206</sup> However, as the international concerns over Iran's nuclear program grew, most of the

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<sup>204</sup> Al Marashi, "Kuwaiti Shi'a."

<sup>205</sup> "Sheikh Sabah starts key visit to Iran," *Kuwait News Agency*, January 10, 2003.

<sup>206</sup> Giorgio Cafiero and Cinzia Miotto, "Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations: The Energy Angle," *Atlantic Council*, September 29, 2016.

agreements between Iran and Kuwait were not implemented. In the midst of the United Nations Security Council deliberation on the Iranian nuclear program, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad travelled to Kuwait in February 2006,<sup>207</sup> becoming the first President of the Islamic Republic to visit Kuwait City. This visit was followed by a reassurance trip by Ayatollah Rafsanjani<sup>208</sup> less than two months later.<sup>209</sup> Despite these overtures, international sanctions inhibited both countries from reaping the full benefits of the détente, while marinating mostly cordial relations.

Kuwait, since the beginning of the nuclear talks in 2003, supported Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program, and its amicable position allowed friendly relations and smaller scale partnerships during the negotiation process which lasted more than a decade.<sup>210</sup> As a result of the interim agreement in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1 on November 24, 2013, through the pragmatic constructive approach by the newly elected administration of Hassan Rouhani, Iran and Kuwait were on path to restoring the lost opportunities of the past. Furthermore, with Foreign Minister Zarif's trip to Kuwait just two week later, Iran attempted to assure the Persian Gulf and neighboring countries of the benefits from the nuclear agreement, and prepared the stages for expanding bilateral relations.<sup>211</sup>

As a result of the progress in the nuclear talks in June 2014, Sheikh Sabah, who had previously travelled to Iran as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, became the first Emir of Kuwait to visit the Islamic Republic since the revolution, elevating bilateral relations.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> "Ahmadinejad seeks to allay nuclear fears during Kuwait visit," *Reuters*, February 28, 2006.

<sup>208</sup> Ayatollah Rafsanjani was the Head of The Islamic Republic's Expediency Council at the time

<sup>209</sup> "Rafsanjani meets Kuwaiti Ministers at Bayan Palace," *Kuwait News Agency*, April 16, 2006.

<sup>210</sup> Muhammad Ismail, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Regional Implications and Possible Outcomes," *Asian Politics and Policy* 7, no. 2 (2015)

<sup>211</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Choose Your Neighbors Before Your House," *Al Monitor*, August 5, 2015.

<sup>212</sup> Mohammad Saleh Sodqian, "Kuwait, Iran welcome 'turning point' in relations," *Al Monitor*, June 3, 2014.

In a meeting between the Emir and the Supreme Leader (a rarely seen interaction), Ayatollah Khamenei praised “Kuwait’s kind and wise stances vis-a-vis the developments in the region.”<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, in a joint statement by President Rouhani and Sheikh Sabah, the two leaders stressed the importance of the trip and “the need to continue their efforts to further promote cooperation and to properly benefit from available capabilities, in the context of meeting the aspirations of both peoples,” as well as seeking ways to counter the rise of sectarianism and extremism in the region.<sup>214</sup>

Economic relations, however, remain the most important factor in the eagerness by Kuwait and Iran to expand the ties. According to Guzansky, economic relations have been an integral part of bilateral relations throughout the past century, and play a vital role in the current relationship.<sup>215</sup> Past proposals to realize the economic opportunities between the two countries, especially in the field of gas and water exports from Iran to satisfy the needs of Kuwait, are once again back on the table. While the negotiations to finalize any agreement will take time, the JCPOA permits the two countries to engage in economic partnerships and cooperation. For example, in 2003, the Kuwaiti Energy Minister stated that the proposed clean water pipeline from the Islamic Republic to Kuwait, that channels the water from Iran’s Karun and Karkheh rivers, is “vital” for Kuwait, and the pipeline is classified as “one of the highly important strategic projects.”<sup>216</sup> Even though more than a decade has passed since the discussions started, no substantial progress was made until the JCPOA, which allowed the renegotiation on expediting this project.

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Guzansky, “Strategic Hedging”

<sup>216</sup> “Kuwait to tap Iranian water,” *Al Jazeera*, December 9, 2003.

Furthermore, whilst Kuwait is among the oil rich nations of the Persian Gulf, the country lacks gas supplies and has been a net importer since 2009.<sup>217</sup> Similar to the discussions on the water pipeline, there have been multiple rounds of talks on exporting Iran's gas to Kuwait.<sup>218</sup> Aside from the existing pipeline to Baghdad, which will be finalized in 2017 and is projected to reach Syria, Lebanon, and eventually Europe, there is a second pipeline in construction to Southern Iraq through Basrah, a city between Iran and Kuwait.<sup>219</sup> Due to the proximity, inexpensiveness of the project, and the dire need by Kuwait, the construction of an extension to the pipeline is an important area for bilateral cooperation. These large-scale areas for economic partnerships ensure long-term interdependence that undoubtedly inhibit escalation of tensions to perpetual conflict.

Following the diplomatic row between Saudi Arabia and Iran in January 2016, Kuwait recalled its ambassador from Iran out of respect to Saudi Arabia. However, the strategic decision to continue diplomatic, security, and economic relations in spite of the regional tensions has allowed the Kuwaiti government to present itself as a possible mediator between Iran and the GCC. Furthermore, the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister's trip to Tehran in January 2017 to present a letter on behalf of the GCC that outlines parameters for enhancing relations was in line with Kuwait's proven capacity as a mediator. The fact that President Rouhani travelled to Kuwait and Oman in response to the letter proves the importance of Kuwait as a bridge between Iran and other member states of the GCC. Kuwait's capacity as a mediator is further explained in Chapter 4, Phase 1.

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<sup>217</sup> Chris Stanton, "Kuwait become net gas importer," *The National*, August 6, 2009.

<sup>218</sup> "Iran, Kuwait Sign \$7 Billion Gas Deal," *Agency France Press*, March 16, 2005.

<sup>219</sup> "Iran ready to send natural gas to Kuwait via Iraq: Official," *Press TV*, April 12, 2015.

### The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Bahrain

Bahrain is one of the few Arab countries that was once a part of Iranian territory, and hence has an inseparable ancient history with Iran. Until the late 18th century, when the country became a British protectorate, Bahrain was, and continues to be, a critically important island nation in the Persian Gulf. Due to its geo-strategic position, Bahrain was conquered by the Persians, the Portuguese, the Abbasids, the Omanis, and the British. Iran, however, continued its claim over the island until 1970, just months before the complete British retreat from the Persian Gulf. This history continues to drive relations between Iran and Bahrain even today: Iran is viewed with suspicion by the Bahraini leadership, and Iranians continue to voice their disapproval of the mistreatment of the Shi'a majority in Bahrain. With the 1979 revolution and its religious and political challenges to the regional countries as well as the subsequent eight-year war with Iraq that the Al Khalifah monarchy supported against Iran, the Islamic Republic and Bahrain did not start off on the right foot.

The presence of colonial British naval forces in Bahrain and their subsequent replacement by the United States is another primary complaint against the Al Khalifah monarchy by Iran. Bahrain's facilitation and hosting of the United States Fifth Fleet is a cause of major vexation for the Islamic Republic. While Bahrain, like the other GCC countries, relies on the United States for security, the decision to center the Fifth Fleet, an augmentation of the already present U.S. naval forces in Bahrain, was evidence of ill intent towards the Islamic Republic. From the Iranian point of view, American naval forces are not different from the British presence, and the historic legacies of Bahrain's dependence on the two Western powers continues to be a major hurdle in the betterment of relations.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Sohrabi, "Interview"



The contested view on the history of Bahrain continues to play an important role in the current relations between the Tehran and Manama. Before formalized ties between the rulers of Bahrain and Britain through treaties starting in 1820, Bahrain was a part of Iranian territory in the Persian Gulf. According to Mojtahedzadeh and Adamiyat, in 1602 “at the time of soaring power of Safavid dynasty, Iranian forces defeated Portuguese in ports and islands of Hormuz and expelled them from Mishmahig (Bahrain) and reunited the islands with the mainland Iran once again.”<sup>221</sup> On the contrary, some scholars argue against Iran’s claim. Kelly, for example, argue that the Al Khalifah have been ruling the island since the 18th century, and firmly believe Iran does not have a legitimate claim over Bahrain. Kelly further contends that “by the uninterrupted rule of the Al Khalifah Sheikhs since 1783 and by the long and finally successful struggle of their subjects against various would-be conquerors” the facts of Bahrain’s independence have been established.<sup>222</sup> Despite the debate by Adamiyat and Kelly, and Iran's formal introduction of a bill giving “right to return a deputy” to Bahrain as the fourteenth province of Iran in 1957, Britain and the Shah of Iran agreed to peacefully settle the dispute through the United Nations.<sup>223</sup>

The negotiations led to the adjudication of the dispute by the United Nations Secretary General and its resolution by the Security Council in 1970. In coordination with the United Kingdom, the government of Iran formally requested the Secretary General for a special envoy to ascertain “the true wishes of the people of Bahrain with respect to the future status of the islands of Bahrain.”<sup>224</sup> Iran and the United Kingdom vowed to accept the results of the findings.

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<sup>221</sup> Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh, Alireza Niknejad, and Ramtin Salarian, “Continental Shelf Issue in Iran and Its Southern Neighbors,” *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 4, (Winter 2014): 175

<sup>222</sup> J.B. Kelly, “The Persian Claim to Bahrain,” *International Affairs* 33, no. 1 (January 1957): 70

<sup>223</sup> Report of the Personal Representative of the Secretary General in Charge of the Good Offices Mission in Bahrain, *United Nations Security Council S/9772*, 1970

<sup>224</sup> Note by the Secretary General to the Security Council. *United Nations Security Council S/9726*. March 28, 1970

The report found that the majority of the people in Bahrain sought independence from both Iran and Britain. The representative's report stated: "My consultations have convinced me that the overwhelming majority of the people of Bahrain wish to gain recognition of their identity in a fully independent and sovereign state free to decide for itself its relations with other States."<sup>225</sup> The reports paved the way for Bahrain's independence and led to a demarcation agreement between the newly established governments of Bahrain and the Iran. They signed a continental shelf agreement on June 17, 1971, that entered into force on May 14, 1972 and officially ended the dispute.<sup>226</sup>

Many Iranians, however, continue to believe that Bahrain is part of the territory of Iran to this day, either due to blithe disregard of international law and the events of 1970, or due to the belief that the Shah of Iran was tricked by Britain in bequeathing Bahrain in exchange for the other three disputed islands in the Persian Gulf. The Shah did not have domestic support for his negotiations, and many Iranian scholars and practitioners had argued since the start of the twentieth century that Bahrain was rightfully part of the Iran's territory.<sup>227</sup> This lack of understanding of the demarcation agreement and final report by the United Nations continued to plague the relations in subsequent decades, especially after the 1979 revolution, that once again resurfaced old grievances. Even though the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic did not and have not officially reclaimed Bahrain since 1970, the sentiments, remarks, and actions by ordinary Iranian people, journalists, and clerics have strained relations on multiple occasions. The 2007 editorial by Keyhan Newspaper in Iran that called Bahrain "the fourteenth province"

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<sup>225</sup> United Nations Security Council S/9772

<sup>226</sup> Mojtahedzadeh et al., "Continental Shelf," 175

<sup>227</sup> Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh, "Bahrain: The Land of Political Movements," *Rahavard: Journal of Iranian Studies* 11, no. 39, (1995)

and further stated that “the principal demand of the Bahraini people today is to return this province, which was separated from Iran, to its mother, Islamic Iran,” is an example of these sentiments.<sup>228</sup>

Ties between Iran and the people of Bahrain are strong. This does not mean an automatic affinity between the two countries, nor does it mean the Bahraini people are keen on joining the Islamic Republic. A slightly dated report indicates that in the in 2001-2002, eighty-one percent of foreigners naturalized in Bahrain were of Iranian origin, while from 2001-2011, forty percent of foreigners naturalized were of Iranian origin.<sup>229</sup> Even though there is a sharp decline in naturalization of people with Iranian descent, these numbers are relatively high and incomparable with other regional countries. The presence of so many Iranian origin Baharnas and Bahrainis for more than two millennia on the island has cemented cultural, religious, and social ties with Iran. The periodic migration of people from Iran and Iraq to the island, and a constant flow of people from elsewhere in the region since the 1930s, has resulted in a Shi’a majority in Bahrain ruled by the minority Sunni Al Khalifah family. These demographics are unlike those of any other GCC country.

The minority-majority dynamic coupled with the sectarian differences and the resulting partisanship in the country has fueled divisions in Bahrain. Following the rise of Arab Nationalism and Nasserism, and the 1979 Islamic revolution, all Muslims and Arabs protested across the region and the Middle East to demand changes to their political systems and social welfare. However, playing into the identity politics, the region faced divisions based on Shi’a and Sunni sects, leading to a monolithic understanding of each group and disregarding the vast differences that exists among them. Bahrain, in particular, has the highest Shi’a to Sunni

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<sup>228</sup> Semira Nikou, “Iran Warns Gulf on Bahrain,” *Public Broadcasting Service*, March 25, 2011.

<sup>229</sup> Jure Snoj, “Bahrain’s population – by nationality,” *Business in Qatar and Beyond*, August 24, 2015.

proportion of any Arab country. It is estimated that Shia make up 55-70 percent of the 1.4 million population.<sup>230</sup> The demographic challenge led to the implementation of sectarian policies in the newly established Kingdom, which faced threats from its northern Shi'a neighbor as well demands by their favored Sunni constituents. Particularly, one event continues to murk relations between the different sects within Bahrain, as well as the country's relations with the Islamic Republic: a failed coup attempt in December 1981 organized by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain who were led by an Iraqi Shi'a cleric, Abdulhadi Almadrasy, Imam Khomeini's personal representative to the island.<sup>231</sup>

Not only did the Shi'a group want the overthrow of the Al Khalifah family, but they also wanted to install a government in the style of the Islamic Republic. According to some analysts, such as Rubin, "not only was the Islamic Front linked with Iran, but it also took its direction from Tehran."<sup>232</sup> In August 1980, the Islamic Republic hosted a three-day conference by the Islamic Front in Tehran, and in its final communique declared: "Imam Khomeini is the leader and axis around which our oppressed peoples should rally if they truly seek freedom, since Imam Khomeini is the summit of jihad and faith and the symbol of challenge and endurance. He is the hope of all the oppressed in the world."<sup>233</sup> The failed armed offensive by the Islamic Front destroyed the group's credibility among Bahrainis and continues to be a source of major grievance for the Al Khalifah monarchy toward the Shi'a in Bahrain as well as toward the Islamic Republic.

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<sup>230</sup> Jure Snoj, "Bahrain's population – by nationality," *Business in Qatar and Beyond*, August 24, 2015.

<sup>231</sup> Michael Rubin, "Are Bahraini Shi'ites puppets of Iran?" *American Enterprise Institute*, July 16, 2014.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

The relations between the Islamic Republic and Bahrain have fluctuated from open hostility to *modus vivendi* in the past four decades. Ahmadinejad's first Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki travelled to Manama in 2007 following the debacle created by the editor of Keyhan Newspaper calling Bahrain the "fourteenth province."<sup>234</sup> Mottaki seemed to reassure the Bahraini government stating: "Iran and Bahrain respect each other's national sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>235</sup> In an effort to better relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Mottaki also attended the Manama security conference in December 2010 and reiterated the Islamic Republic's aspirations for brotherly relations, saying: "we have never used our force against our neighbors and never will, because our neighbors are our Muslim brothers.... Your power in the region is our power, and our power is your power."<sup>236</sup> During the same speech, Mottaki told his Arab counterparts that "the United States, rather than Iran, was the real threat to the region and that the Persian Gulf should 'indigenize' security and rid itself of meddling outsiders."<sup>237</sup> However, the GCC countries did not view these overtures as truly sincere and did not act to build on them. Even if the proposals were to be deliberated in the future, the events that unfolded just two months later uprooted their chances.

The continuous tensions between the monarchy and large segments of Bahraini society led to various reforms, especially with the accession of King Hamad in 1999; including the gradual implementation of welfare programs, release of political prisoners, and the inclusion of

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<sup>234</sup> Nikou, "Iran Warns Gulf"

<sup>235</sup> "Tehran dismisses territorial claims over Bahrain." *Al Arabiya*. July 15, 2007.

<sup>236</sup> Remarks by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki at the 7th Regional Security Summit. *Manama, Bahrain*. December 4, 2010

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

the Shi'a in Bahrain's Council of Representatives.<sup>238</sup> However, as the 2011 Arab uprisings illustrated, the sectarian divides within Bahrain were never fully reconciled. The events that occurred in February and March 2011 in Bahrain led to wide-scale persecution of protestors. As the majority of Bahrainis are Shi'a, the predominant protestors were also Shi'a, primarily because they have legitimate grievances including dismal economic and employment situations. Moreover, the labeling of the Shi'a as Iran loyalists, as having dual allegiances to Bahrain and the Islamic Republic, or merely as being the propagators of the conflict, has severely damaged relations between the different sects in Bahrain as well as with Iran. Furthermore, the Bahraini government has implemented a policy to grant citizenships to Sunnis from Pakistani, Yemeni, and Iraqi who are willing to fight in Bahrain's security forces.<sup>239</sup> Through this policy the government seeks to alter the country's demography by decreasing the proportion of Shi'as, as well as to bolster the military sans Shi'a citizens; fueling divisions and dissent in the country.

The close relations between the royal families of Al Saud and Al Khalifah are, undoubtedly, a strong factor in the domestic politics of Bahrain, as well as in the island's relations with Iran. The 2011 uprising in Bahrain illustrated Saudi Arabia's strong interest and influence in the island. Through the King Fahd causeway that was built in the 1980s to connect the two countries, the Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Forces assisted the government in maintaining power and further suppressing the protestors. The war of words exacerbated following the Saudi led intervention in March 2011, and has continued uninterrupted ever since. Bahrain has repeatedly accused Iran of meddling in the internal affairs of the island, as well as providing military and moral support for protestors. The Islamic Republic has repeatedly denied these

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<sup>238</sup> Zubaida, "Sectarian Dimensions"

<sup>239</sup> Rubin, "Puppets of Iran"

allegations, while at the same time maintaining its moral support for the oppressed people of Bahrain, drawing on its to core ideological principle of assisting the oppressed.

Even though Iran has repeatedly voiced its condemnation of the Bahraini ruling family in response to the imprisonment, harsh punishment, and segregation of the Shi'a majority, Iran's involvement in direct meddling in the country is arguably exaggerated, and as Monshipouri and Dorraj state: "Bahrainis are not taking their cues from Tehran."<sup>240</sup> The Bahraini movement does not want to be labeled as Iran loyalists; and the mainstream opposition party, Al Wefaq, prefers to be inclusive of all Muslims in Bahrain. Furthermore, the Shi'a in Bahrain are not all followers of Ayatollah Khamenei as a Marja'a; rather many Bahrainis follow Iraq's Ayatollah Sistani or the Lebanese Ayatollah Fadlallah for guidance, primarily due to the fact that Bahrain is also not a monolithic country, there exists divergence of thought on the concept of Velayate Faghih, and the concerns associated with having links to Iran.<sup>241</sup>

Clearly, however, the Iranian voices are the loudest and seemingly most influential in antagonizing the Al Khalifah monarchy at times of vulnerability, as well as having a charging impact on small, and at times large, segments of the Bahraini society. Ayatollah Khamenei, for example, stated during his remarks on March 21, 2011, that the "victory of the people of Bahrain was inevitable," and rejected accusations that Iran was "supporting the people of Bahrain because they are Shia," aiming at having a larger audience in the island. He further affirmed that the Islamic Republic "is predicated on defending the people and their rights against all dictatorial and egotistical rulers without distinguishing between Sunnis and Shia."<sup>242</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei

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<sup>240</sup> Mahmoud Monshipouri and Manochehr Dorraj, "Iran's Foreign Policy: A Shifting Strategic Landscape," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 4 (2013)

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, November 23, 2011 (Final Revision of December 10, 2011)

added that “Saudi Arabia committed a mistake by sending its forces into Bahrain because this enrages the Islamic nations.”<sup>243</sup>

These remarks by the Supreme Leader unquestionably increased tensions between the two countries, however, as repeatedly asserted by all Iranian officials, the Iranian involvement in Bahrain is limited to providing moral support of the people. Furthermore, the Report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry in 2011 found no proof of Iranian interference in the uprising. The report states: “The evidence presented to the Commission by the Government of Bahrain on the involvement by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the internal affairs of Bahrain does not establish a discernible link between specific incidents that occurred in Bahrain during February and March 2011 and the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>244</sup>

The ongoing tensions in Bahrain have inhibited the restoration of full relations between the monarchy and the Islamic Republic. The accusations by the Bahraini government against Iranian meddling, and Iran’s condemnation of the monarchy’s oppressive actions continues uninterrupted six years after their resurfacing. In May 2012, talks of Bahraini unification with Saudi Arabia as part of a wider union plan sparked mass protests in Tehran, mainly due to the historic claims over the island and the fierce opposition to the perceived annexation by Saudi Arabia.<sup>245</sup> Days after the protests in Iran, the Speaker of Iran’s Majles, Ali Larijani, stated: “If Bahrain is supposed to be integrated into another country, it must be Iran and not Saudi Arabia.”<sup>246</sup> In reaction, Bahrain’s Foreign Ministry condemned the statements made by Larijani

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Sami Aboudi, “Bahrain protests criticism of GCC union plans,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2012.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.



and other officials saying “These statements represent a flagrant interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom, and gross violation of its sovereignty and independence.”<sup>247</sup>

Even with Rouhani’s victory in the elections and the settling of the nuclear dispute with world powers, hostile relations between Iran and Bahrain continued to deteriorate after the execution of Sheikh Nimr, and the subsequent attacks at the Saudi diplomatic offices in Tehran and Mashhad. Bahrain, similar to other countries dependent on Saudi largesse including Sudan and Djibouti, followed Saudi Arabia in cutting off all diplomatic and economic ties with Iran in January 2016: an act rare in its magnitude by Bahrain.

As a result of this new era of strained relations, Iran has hosted leaders of the Bahraini resistance on several occasions and have offered them open platforms in Tehran and Qom. In March 2016, senior Revolutionary Guard commander, Saeed Qassimi, stated that Iran is a base “for the support of revolution in Bahrain,” and referred to Bahrain as an “Iranian province separated from Iran as a result of colonialism.”<sup>248</sup> Just months later, on June 20, 2016, Bahrain ordered the revocation of a prominent Shi’a cleric, Sheikh Isa Qassim, on charges of “fomenting an extremist sectarian atmosphere” along with money laundering. This resulted in a charged response from Iranian officials. General Qassem Soleimani asserted in a statement that: “Al Khalifah will definitely pay the price for that and their bloodthirsty regime will be toppled.”<sup>249</sup>

The tensions between Iran and Bahrain have had serious impact on trading relations between the two countries and aside from minimal oil, gas, and mining trade there has been minimal economic and commercial interaction. Despite Bahrain’s need of natural gas and the

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Souad Mekhennet, and Joby Warrick, “U.S. increasingly sees Iran’s hand in the arming of Bahraini militants,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2017.

<sup>249</sup> “Iran warns Bahrain over revoking cleric's citizenship.” *Al Jazeera*. June 21, 2016.

talks held in the 2000s for a 25-year agreement, the two countries have failed to reach a sustainable contract.<sup>250</sup> The numerous past attempts at reaching an agreement failed due to periodic tensions between the two countries. However, due to the importance of stable, inexpensive, and long-term gas imports by Bahrain, as well as Iran's need to export its gas products, an agreement continues to await the reconciliation of relations between the two governments. Furthermore, Iranian gas supply to Bahrain will ensure a positive interdependence between the two countries that has the potential of averting a large scale or a long-term conflict.

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<sup>250</sup> Tamsin Carlisle, "Iran-Bahrain gas project off again," *The National*, May 23, 2011.

### The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Before the 1979 revolution, Iran and Saudi Arabia were the two pillars of stability in the Middle East through their close alliance with the United States, and were rivals and partners during the oil boom of the 1970s. However, with the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of official Shi'a Islamic governance in Iran, the relations transformed to political and religious rivalry that was not bound to the Persian Gulf, but affected the broader Middle East and the Muslim world. The revolution in Iran was a source of inspiration for many Shi'a minority populations, as well as other Islamist groups under monarchies. Furthermore, official statements and unofficial rhetoric by the newly established Islamic Republic were a direct threat to Saudi Arabia's domestic fractions, its regional influence, and its legitimacy as the custodian of Mecca and Medina.<sup>251</sup> As Masry argues, "the *raison d'être* for such antagonism stems from Saudi fears of Iranian ideological attractions and political reach within the region, as well as within Saudi Arabia's own Shi'a populace."<sup>252</sup>

In an effort to undermine the Islamic Republic and stem its broader influence, Saudi Arabia was among the biggest supporters of Saddam Hussein's regime during the Iran-Iraq War, providing him with military and financial assistance. With the escalation of direct conflict as a result of the 1987 incident in the Great Mosque, Iran's strained relations with Saudi Arabia continued longer than those with the other GCC countries. Ayatollah Rafsanjani's reconciliation efforts paved the way for the resumption of diplomatic ties in 1991, which was followed by official visits from Ayatollah Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad to Saudi Arabia in the following years. In return, then Crown Prince Abdullah visited Iran in December 1997 to take

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<sup>251</sup> Zubaida, "Sectarian Dimensions"

<sup>252</sup> Sara Masry, "Changing the Lens: Contemporary Saudi-Iran Relations and Potential Benefits of Détente," in *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests Over Historic Rivalry*, ed. by Maaïke Warnaar et al. (London: Gerlach Press, 2016)

part in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Summit in Tehran. Following these interactions, King Fahd stated during his remarks at the opening of the Shura Council in July 1999, that strengthening ties with Iran was in the interest of not just the Arab states of the Persian Gulf but indeed the Arab and Islamic worlds at large.<sup>253</sup> At the same time Ayatollah Khamenei called for further cooperation with Saudi Arabia, and the two countries signed a security and anti-terrorism agreement in 2000.<sup>254</sup> These interactions presented an era of close collaboration and a change from the more than a decade of conflict between the two countries.

Even though the Hajj continues to be a factor in escalating direct bilateral tensions, evident by the Mena tragedy in 2015, there is a wide array of other political and regional issues that have not allowed the two countries to fully enhance bilateral relations. Iran and Saudi Arabia have opposing interests in Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, and both countries have adopted a competitive orientation that have shaped their policies towards the other. The negative goal attainments of both Iran and Saudi Arabia have prolonged the bilateral and regional disputes. Iran's fundamental opposition to U.S. military presence and assistance to the Persian Gulf countries, and GCC states' reliance on the United States is one inherent point of dispute over the past four decades, that has largely influenced each country's bilateral and regional policies with respect to the other and the regional dynamics. Salem describes the competitive approach by both Iran and Saudi Arabia as a function of strategic vision;

Iran envisions a region banded together to resist 'imperial' domination, with itself as the preeminent power; it argues that its size, centrality, resources, Islamic renewal, defiance of outside powers, and technological advancement justify this position. Saudi Arabia envisions a much looser region in which U.S. power guarantees Gulf security, and Saudi

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Mona Eltahawy, "Khatami takes olive branch to Arab neighbors," *The Guardian*, May 16, 1999.

Arabia counterpoises Iranian power, given its own energy resources and its central position within Islam as the custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.<sup>255</sup>

The depiction by Salem of the goal attainments of both countries explains the rationale behind current conflicts, where both Iran and Saudi Arabia have implemented policies to counter and contain the other. Moreover, the divergence of national and political interest and the rivalry for dominance in the Persian Gulf and the wider Muslim world has led to zero-sum politics and severe political, human, and economic costs. The aftermath of the execution of Sheikh Nimr and the storming of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran further fueled the geopolitical divides between the two countries. At the same time, however, the Saudi monarchy appears to have no intention of escalating the conflict with Iran. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated in an interview that “war with Iran is a big disaster that we won’t allow to ignite,” illustrating a desire to end the regional conflicts, and possibly more amiable relations with Iran.<sup>256</sup>

### The Hajj Dimension

The annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina has been a source of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the 1920s, before the official establishment of the Kingdom. Various issues have also emerged every year since the Iranian revolution.<sup>257</sup> Following the official emergence of Imam Khomeini as the leader of the revolution in 1978, the Iranians and many Shi’a attending the annual Hajj pilgrimage engaged in demonstrations that at times led to scuffles with security forces. In the midst of the Iran-Iraq War, on July 31, 1987, a deadly quarrel occurred in the Great Mosque between the demonstrators and the Saudi security authorities who

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<sup>255</sup> Salem, “Building Cooperation”

<sup>256</sup> Interview with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, *The Economist*, January 6, 2016

<sup>257</sup> Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in the *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996)

“employed deadly force to thwart the Iranian crowd.”<sup>258</sup> The clash resulted in the death of more than four hundred pilgrims, mostly Iranian nationals, which resulted in the storming of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran the next day and the death of a Saudi diplomat. In a series of reciprocal actions, Saudi Arabia cut ties with Iran in an attempt to restrict the number of Iranian pilgrims, which led to Iran banning the Hajj in 1988.<sup>259</sup>

The tensions between the two rivaling countries continued into the following years, until the devastating earthquake in June 1990 in Iran, when Saudi Arabia sent humanitarian assistance to Rudbar and Manjil.<sup>260</sup> President Rafsanjani took advantage of the opening by Saudi Arabia, and with the assistance of Omani mediation, Iran and Saudi Arabia managed to resolve the preliminary disputes. The foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a written agreement in Muscat in March 1991, resolving the disputes over the Hajj pilgrimage and resuming diplomatic ties, putting an end to twelve years of conflict.<sup>261</sup> The resumption of friendly relations resulted in twenty-five years of somewhat peaceful Iranian pilgrimage as well as a *modus vivendi* in the bilateral relations.<sup>262</sup>

However, the Mena tragedy on September 24, 2015, occurred as a result of a stampede en route to the annual Hajj pilgrimage, and led to 769 deaths according to Saudi reports, and 4,700 by Iranian estimates, and more than two thousand by an Associated Press computation.<sup>263</sup> In

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Philip Shenon, “Iranian May See Quake As Opening to West,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 1990.

<sup>261</sup> Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), pp. 161-87.

<sup>262</sup> Merriam-Webster defines *Modus vivendi* as literally meaning “manner of living” in Latin, and it sometimes has that meaning in English as well. Usually, though, a *modus vivendi* is a working arrangement that disputing parties can live with, at least until a more permanent solution can be found.

<sup>263</sup> “Saudi Arabia Hajj disaster death toll rises,” *Al Jazeera America*, October 19, 2015.

response, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that “the incompetence of the Saudis and their failure to provide security for the pilgrims in the house of God in reality showed that this government is not capable of managing the two holy mosques.”<sup>264</sup> This harsh criticism led to Iran banning the Hajj in 2016. As one of the five pillars of Islam, forced upon every financially and physically capable Muslim, the exclusion of Iranian pilgrims sparked further public disapproval towards the Kingdom. To inhibit further escalation, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached an agreement in March 2017 for the return of Iranian pilgrims to the annual Hajj in the Summer of that year.<sup>265</sup>

### The Rivalry for Dominance

The tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have wide-ranging and far-reaching reverberations in the Middle East and beyond. The geopolitical alliances in the region and sectarian divisions have had great influence on the escalation of regional conflicts. The various disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not confined to the Persian Gulf but has spread throughout the entire Middle East and other Muslim countries. The allegiances, alliances and ethno-confessional ties have further broadened and complicated the conflict. Sectarian formulations of conflict are fueled by political policies that are based on, as Zubaida argues, “defensive regime strategies and sectarian entrepreneurs” using “the politics of identity in a globalized world.”<sup>266</sup>

The post-Saddam Iraq is one arena in which both Iran and Saudi Arabia have invested heavily for their own national interests. The rivalry for dominance in Iraq fueled the sectarian

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<sup>264</sup> Arash Karami, “Khamenei calls for international investigation into hajj stampede,” *Al Monitor*, September 7, 2016.

<sup>265</sup> Margherita Stancati, “Iranians to Participate in Hajj in Saudi Arabia After Ban,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2017.

<sup>266</sup> Zubaida, “Sectarian Dimensions”

civil war after the removal of Saddam Hussein, and further prolonged the devastating situation in the country. From the Arab as well as other international perspectives, Iran was the primary benefactor of the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq, and as Khashoggi reiterated a statement by Saud Al Faisal who had stated the “U.S. handed Iraq to Iran on a golden plate, and ‘opened the apartheid of Iranians’ in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain.”<sup>267</sup> Iran’s growing friendly relations with the Iraqi government and factions within the Iraqi society is counter to Saudi policies of containing the Islamic Republic’s influence.

In a brief illustration of the adaption of a cooperative approach by both Iran and Saudi Arabia, both countries constructively collaborated to end the civil war in Lebanon in 2006, at least initially. However, during the 2008 Lebanese conflict, Iran supported Hezbollah, and the Kingdom supported the opposing Sunni led government of Siniora. The policies of the two countries were influential in the more than two years of political stalemate in Lebanon since 2014. As a compromise, Lebanon formed a government with a Saudi favored prime minister and an Iranian favored president. Nevertheless, Iran’s support of Hezbollah continues to be unacceptable by Saudi Arabia and its partners, and with intense Saudi lobbying efforts, the GCC and the Arab League designated the Lebanese Hezbollah as a terrorist organization for its support of the Syrian government in March 2016, resulting in the further tensions with the Islamic Republic.<sup>268</sup>

Yemen and Syria, however, remain the two most important indirect theaters of conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran’s moral, rhetorical, and material support of the Houthi’s in Yemen is the most serious cause of tensions for the Saudi leadership, due to the shared border

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<sup>267</sup> Panel Discussion. “Saudi-Iranian”

<sup>268</sup> “Arab League labels Hezbollah a 'terrorist' group,” *Al Jazeera*, March 12, 2016.



between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the Yemeni conflict, as described in more detail in Chapter 3, has become a way to garner support within the GCC leaders and populations against the Islamic Republic by constantly using the media to blame Iran for the heavy financial, military, and human costs in Yemen and the prolongation of a supposedly swift military action. Additionally, the concurrence of the post-JCPOA era for Iran, as well as the civil war and the fight against Daesh in Syria, have further complicated the interdependence of issues, where the settlement of one dispute can lead to broader agreements on other issues. However, relations are easily soured and diplomatic disputes seem to always lurk around the corner. The recent flare-up around the execution of Sheikh Nimr in January 2016, and the storming of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic offices in Tehran and Mashhad, challenge the efforts to resolve the past and new disputes.

### The Sectarian Factor

In Saudi Arabia, the existence of a Shi'a minority and the historical legacies of the Eastern Province have been a constant challenge for the Al Saud family. In line with the patronage of loyal constituents, the unbalanced distribution of wealth and of development projects around the country has fueled tensions among religious and ethnic minorities.<sup>269</sup> The Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia was largely excluded from development projects prior to the oil shocks of the late 1970s, until the Saudi leadership recognized that the unbalanced distribution of wealth could allow the rise of potential oppositionists.<sup>270</sup> Even though new

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<sup>269</sup> Giacomo Luciano, "Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework," in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciano (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

reforms were periodically introduced to reduce the tensions with the Shi'a minority, the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia do not have access to the same services provided to the rest of the country.<sup>271</sup>

Saudi Arabia is a prime example of how first and second class citizens exist in rentier States.<sup>272</sup> Co-ethnic and co-religionist Persian Gulf monarchs favor their co-sectarians over second class citizens, as arguably it is cheaper to buy their support than that of the other sect; “Why waste limited resources chasing citizens opposed to the status quo when they might be used to reward those who already have a material stake in its preservation,” Gengler asserts,<sup>273</sup> illustrating a logical strategic path for the ruling families and elites that ensures their survival and a strengthened relationship with loyal constituents, while containing the minority. Moreover, the Shi'a in particular are largely viewed as Iran sympathizers, and as the execution of Sheikh Nimr illustrated, association with the Islamic Republic will not be tolerated by the Kingdom. Nevertheless, in the quest for stability and security in all of the provinces, Masry argues that Saudi Arabia “would benefit from addressing the deep-rooted sectarian, political, and socio-economic drivers of dissent among its Shi'a natives.”<sup>274</sup> Such a proposition will also have positive reverberations in the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as it will illustrate a reduction in sectarian policies by the Saudi government and will have an impact on Iran's regional policies as well.

However, after the Mena tragedy during the Hajj in September 2015 and Saudi Arabia's termination of ties on January 3, 2016, a day after the execution of Sheikh Nimr and the attack

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World,” in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciano, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

<sup>273</sup> Justin Gengler, “Understanding Sectarianism in the Gulf,” in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. by Lawrence Potter, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

<sup>274</sup> Masry, “Changing the Lens”

on the Saudi Embassy, relations reached their worse levels in the history of the two countries. These events and the regional battles for influence have resulted in an unprecedented climate of hostility.<sup>275</sup> The Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel Al Jubair, has become one of the leading anti-Iran figures in the international community. He has countlessly accused and blamed the Islamic Republic of “igniting sectarianism,” “supporting terrorism,” and “interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries.”<sup>276</sup> Basing his arguments on these three claims, Al Jubair’s primary mission has become to denounce and blame Iran during conversation with world leaders. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia revamped its anti-Iran policies following the election of Donald Trump, whose policy towards Iran aligns more with that of Saudi leadership than did President Obama’s.

An example of the new Saudi Arabian international efforts to counter Iran and further ignite tensions, on July 9, 2016, Prince Turki Al Faisal attended a conference hosted by the National Council of Resistance of Iran, a cult like dissident group that was labeled a terrorist organization by the United States until 2012, and continues to be despised by the overwhelming majority of Iranians. During his remarks, Prince Turki extended his support for the organization that shook hands with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, and stated that the whole of the Muslim world stands to support their cause both in “heart and soul,” and praised its leader for “endeavor to rid your people of the Khomeinist cancer.”<sup>277</sup> One of the harshest comments by any GCC official, the remarks by Prince Turki, in wake of the growing tensions in 2016, presents a

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Remarks by Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair at the Munich Security Conference. *Munich, Germany*. February 19, 2017

<sup>277</sup> “Prince Turki Al Faisal, at the Paris Rally to Free Iran: The Muslim World Supports You both in Heart and Soul,” *Asharq Al Awsat*, July 9, 2016.

revamped effort by Saudi Arabia to undermine the Iranian government and even push for regime change policies that were set aside by the United States since 2013.

### Future Prospects

While the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are at an unprecedentedly high level, the two countries, as the two most powerful nations in the Persian Gulf, are responsible for ensuring peace and stability in the region. As Khaled Al Maeena contends, “I believe the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement is beneficial for the whole world. Iran is a founding member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Iran is a neighbor, Iran is a Muslim country, and if Iran and Saudi Arabia get rid of this tension and anxiety it can go a long way in resolving other regional disputes.”<sup>278</sup> The commonalities between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while less than most other Iran-GCC relations, have the capacity to trump the hostilities, and moving away from a zero-sum approach will undoubtedly benefit not only the two countries, but also the entire Middle East and beyond.

Despite the overtures by President Rouhani, Saudi Arabia, especially since the ascension of King Salman, has maintained a hardline approach.<sup>279</sup> This approach, however, runs counter to the interests of the region as well as further diminishes chances for rapprochement. As Al Maeena also argues, “the hard positions by certain Arab countries and some GCC countries does not help.”<sup>280</sup> In response to a question regarding Saudi Arabia’s discontinuation of diplomatic and economic ties with Iran, Khaled Al Maeena stated: “I believe the termination of ties is an

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<sup>278</sup> Al Maeena, “Interview”

<sup>279</sup> Mousavian, “Interview”

<sup>280</sup> Khaled Al Maeena, *Interview by Mehran Haghiriian*, March 10, 2017

impediment, and it is important to have some kind of relationship.”<sup>281</sup> To overcome the post-2016 impasse, Iran and Saudi Arabia must arrive at a mutual understanding that the continuation of the competitive approach has led to a zero-sum outcome. Or as Ambassador Mousavian asserts, “to alleviate the tensions between them, Iran and Saudi Arabia need to recognize they both have legitimate security interests in the region and not to approach the other in a zero-sum way.”<sup>282</sup>

Both countries can shift their focus from the negative interdependency and increasing tensions, to a more amicable relationship and take advantage of the multiple areas of economic cooperation. For example, the annual Hajj pilgrimage, in which more than one hundred thousand Iranians participate, and the Umra pilgrimages, in which another five hundred thousand Iranian pilgrims travel to Saudi Arabia, provide the Saudi government as well as people with around three billion dollars in profits every year.<sup>283</sup> As Khashoggi expounds, “in principle we should have a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is good for everyone, ... I am from Medina, we like the Iranians, their pilgrims, they are good spenders, but we do not like the politics of their government.”<sup>284</sup> The distinction by the Saudi Arabians between the Iranian people and the government is important, and at the same times allows for the future resumption of economic and other people-to-people exchanges. Another investment area to explore is natural gas from the South Pars fields which can be “easily piped to the kingdom.”<sup>285</sup> A relatively low-

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Mousavian, “Interview”

<sup>283</sup> Katie Sola, “Breaking with Iran Could Cost Saudi Arabia Billions In Revenues From Pilgrims,” *Forbes*, January 5, 2016.

<sup>284</sup> Panel Discussion. “Saudi-Iranian”

<sup>285</sup> Seznec, “Pot of Gold”

cost investment, the pipeline can secure the gas needs of Saudi Arabia as well as ensure a strengthened bilateral relationship.

## Conclusion

Table 1. Factors in Bilateral Relations Between Iran and the GCC Countries

Country	Positive Factor(s)	Negative Factor(s)	Contingent Factor(s)
Bahrain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is currently no strong positive factor in relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Saudi Arabia's strong influence on the Al Khalifah monarchy</li> <li>Presence of the U.S. Fifth Fleet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Shi'a majority in Bahrain</li> <li>Iran's relations with the Shi'a population of Bahrain</li> </ul>
Kuwait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural and historic ties</li> <li>Kuwait's capacity as a mediator</li> <li>Shared economic interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is currently no negative factor in relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sectarian divisions in Kuwait</li> <li>Maritime dispute in the Persian Gulf</li> </ul>
Oman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oman's capacity as a mediator</li> <li>Defense and security cooperation</li> <li>Gas pipeline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is currently no negative factor in relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dependency on Sultan Qabous</li> <li>The sharing of the Strait of Hormoz</li> </ul>
Qatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared gas field in the Persian Gulf</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S. and Saudi influence in Qatar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Qatar's strategic use of its regional foreign policy</li> </ul>
Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is currently no strong positive factor in relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership with the U.S.</li> <li>Sectarian Regional Policies</li> <li>Proxy wars in the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual Hajj pilgrimage</li> <li>The Shi'a minority in Saudi Arabia</li> </ul>
United Arab Emirates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large Iranian community in Dubai</li> <li>Strong economic ties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The dispute over the three islands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Abu Dhabi's alignment with Saudi Arabia</li> </ul>

This chapter differentiated Iran's bilateral relations with the member states of the GCC, and as summarized in Table 1. there are various positive, negative, and contingent factors that shape each of the relationships. While there are currently no strong positive factors in the relations with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and there are no strong negative factors in the relations with Oman and Kuwait, the contingent factors have the capacity to fill in the gaps. Moreover, the bilateral relationships, while distinct from one another, are greatly influenced by the geopolitics of the region as well as Iran's relations with other GCC countries and the international community. Nevertheless, the most important factor that strengthens each of the bilateral relationships is linked to economic interactions. In contrast, the most important and reoccurring negative factor is the GCC's strong relations with the United States which is a primary grievance of the Islamic Republic towards the GCC countries.

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and the start of a new era in Iranian politics and governance after Imam Khomeini's demise in 1989, the Islamic Republic initiated a new approach towards the Arab states of the Persian Gulf; one that aimed for constructive engagements rather than the hostilities that existed during the decade prior. While tensions did not fully fade between Iran and the majority of the GCC countries, all sides managed to move beyond the impasse, and maintained mostly cordial relations. While some relationships are exemplary, including the bilateral relations between Iran and Oman, some of the other relationships, including the bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, require strategies at resolving long-lasting disputes and grievances. The next chapter explores the consequences of the JCPOA on these bilateral, as well as multilateral, relations.



### CHAPTER 3

#### CONSEQUENCES OF THE JCPOA ON THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE PERSIAN GULF

The thirteen year negotiations between Iran and world powers on the Iranian nuclear program succeeded with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in Vienna on July 14, 2015. During this lengthy process, there were various factors influencing the duration, substance, and future implications of the deal. From the multiple sanctions imposed on Iran that damaged the country's economy and further isolated it from the international community, to the third parties, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, who hindered the negotiation to advance their own interests, the JCPOA has had, and will continue to have, great impact on global politics and the international relations of the Persian Gulf countries. The high-level negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 were the most successful interactions among both sides since the Islamic revolution in 1979. The new government in Iran showed signs of moderation to the West and negotiated to reach the goal of a "win-win" resolution. The June 2013 Presidential Elections in Iran not only brought hope for the Iranian people, but for the international community as well. The Rouhani Administration was determined to enhance Iran's image on the international stage and keen on effectuating cooperative relations with the international community.

On the other hand, the nuclear agreement has increased tensions between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. As Aras and Yorulmazlar assert, "the Iranian-American détente is perceived by most of the region's leaders as a major threat to the existing regional power equations," even though the era of enhanced relations concluded with the end of the Obama Administration.<sup>286</sup> The renewed nuclear negotiations which, after more than a decade, presented a possibility for a resolution, was less than what some GCC countries hoped to achieve;

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<sup>286</sup> Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, "Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (2014)

primarily due to the fact that the JCPOA did not include non-nuclear concerns of these countries, such as addressing Iran's regional actions. As Mazhar and Goraya put it, "they don't want Iran as a player in the region. They want Iran isolated and out of the picture."<sup>287</sup> Or as Amir Handjani argues, the GCC countries grew accustomed to Iran's isolation, and want to continue keeping Iran in the "penalty box."<sup>288</sup> However, it is a mistake to generalize the GCC countries as a monolithic body, with unified interests and approaches.

In reality, each GCC state reacted differently to the negotiations and the final deal. While Oman was a key factor in the restoration of talks between Iran and the United States, and Kuwait welcomed the negotiations and the final agreement, Saudi Arabia was most unhappy with the progress. After reassurances by the Obama administration at Camp David, including increased military cooperation, the GCC countries collectively recognized and welcomed the deal.<sup>289</sup> The Qatari Foreign Minister, Khalid Al Attiyah, the chairman of the GCC when Secretary of State John Kerry attended a joint meeting in August 2015, stated "this was the best option among other options, and we are confident that what they undertook makes this region safer and more stable."<sup>290</sup> He saw the JCPOA as a means to inhibit nuclear proliferation as well prevent an escalated international conflict. In contrast, however, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have refocused on raising concerns about the end date of the nuclear deal as well as Iran's ballistic missiles program. These new tensions result from the protracted civil wars in Yemen and Syria, where the

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<sup>287</sup> Muhammad Saleem Mazhar and Naheed Goraya, "Geneva Deal: Beginning of a New Era Between Iran-US Relations," *South Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014)

<sup>288</sup> Amir Handjani, *Interview by Mehran Haghiriian*, February 26, 2017

<sup>289</sup> Remarks by President Barack Obama at A Press Conference after Meeting with GCC Leaders. *Camp David, United States*. May 14, 2015.

<sup>290</sup> Michael Gordon, "John Kerry Wins Gulf States' Cautious Support for Iran Deal," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2015.

Saudi royal family and the Abu Dhabi Emirate are heavily involved in pursuing policies directly opposed to Iran's interests, and vice versa.

As Zubaida argues, “the Saudi and Gulf regimes’ concern over Iranian regional gains and the rise of Shi’a power have led to enhanced sectarian strategies to consolidate support from core constituencies and as legitimization of repressive measures.”<sup>291</sup> In other words, the Arabs states have developed sectarian conflicts to curb Iranian influence in the region and delay its rapprochement with the world, while at the same time blaming Iran at home for the chaos in the region as well as the reason for the austerity measures to counter the Islamic Republic. As the former editor of the Saudi Arabia’s Arab News, Khaled Al Maeena, argues that “even if Iran was like the North Pole, the problems of the GCC and the Arab world will exist. We have problems because we have failed in many ways, the Arab world has paid because of revolutions, disasters, dictatorships, and all, and we cannot blame others outside.”<sup>292</sup> Al Maeena further recollected asking a leading analyst in Saudi Arabia if they will “continue to have the same problems within the GCC if the Iranian threat, real, or not real, exist or not, and he replied admitting that we will still have the same problems.”<sup>293</sup> The realization that Iran is not the cause of the domestic problems is counter to the official narrative of the monarchies, however, they provide an understanding of the existing societal opinions and dynamics in the GCC.

With the goal of realizing the areas of conflict and potential arenas for cooperation, this chapter sees the JCPOA as the most significant event in the history of the relationship between Iran and the GCC since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. This chapter aims to identify the consequences of the JCPOA on future of bilateral and multilateral relations in four sections:

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<sup>291</sup> Zubaida, “Sectarian Dimensions”

<sup>292</sup> Al Maeena, “Interview”

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

Diplomatic and political interactions, where Iran's diplomatic outreach, and the events following the execution of Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr are analyzed. Regional security, which looks at the escalation of the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, and the fight against terrorism and extremism. Rise of sectarianism and identity politics, exploring the increased sectarian divide between the Shi'a and Sunni and the effects of identity politics. Foreign impediments to the betterment of relations, with particular attention to United States' interference and presence in the region as well as the competing cooperation proposals from the United States and Israel to the GCC countries.

### Diplomatic Interactions

The diplomatic interactions between Iran and the GCC countries expanded from 2013 to 2016 during the nuclear negotiations and following the signing of the JCPOA. President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif embarked on a revitalized approach towards the GCC countries with the hopes of mending tensions and disputes, as well as forging a more cooperative relationship with Iran's Arab neighbors. However, these efforts were sidelined by the surfacing of newfound conflicts following the execution of Sheikh Nimr and its aftermath in the Persian Gulf. This section analyzes Iran's diplomatic outreach since the start of Hassan Rouhani's presidency in 2013, as well as dissects the diplomatic repercussions of the execution of Sheikh Nimr on the relations between Iran and the GCC countries.

### Iran's Diplomatic Outreach

From the very beginning of his administration in 2013, President Rouhani demonstrated his determination to portray a new image of Iran: an Iran that seeks peace, moderation and

international cooperation. In an article in *The Washington Post* that he wrote after his first appearance at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013, President Rouhani outlined his foreign policy approach: “The world has changed. International politics is no longer a zero-sum game but a multi-dimensional arena where cooperation and competition often occur simultaneously. Gone is the age of blood feuds. World leaders are expected to lead in turning threats into opportunities.”<sup>294</sup> He thus presented a very different *modus operandi* than his predecessor and one seldom seen by the Islamic Republic.<sup>295</sup>

Additionally, Iran’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, was instrumental in Iran’s revitalized foreign affairs. Foreign Minister Zarif asserted in an article, explaining the Islamic Republic’s interest for enchainning relations with the regional countries by stating that, “Iran’s top priority is to establish strong ties with its neighbors.”<sup>296</sup> As Shayan argues, Iranian geo-strategy can be defined as “a desire for good neighborliness with the members of the GCC.”<sup>297</sup> It is imperative for Iran to have positive working relations with its physical and littoral neighbors to achieve regional peace and stability and to advance its national interests. Zarif also explained the new administration’s approach in an opinion piece in *Ashraq Al Awsat*, titled “Our neighbors are our priority,” soon after the interim nuclear agreement was reached in 2013:

A country cannot change its neighbors. In our interconnected world, the fate of one nation is tied to the destinies of its neighbors. The body of water that separates us from our southern neighbors is not just a waterway—it is our shared lifeline. All of us depend on it, not just for survival, but to thrive. With our fates so closely tied together, the belief

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<sup>294</sup> Hassan Rouhani, “President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to engage,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2013.

<sup>295</sup> Merriam-Webster defines *Modus Operandi* as a method of procedure

<sup>296</sup> Zarif, “Choose Your Neighbors”

<sup>297</sup> Shayan, “Geopolitical Subjectivity”

that one's interests can be pursued without consideration of the interests of others is delusional.<sup>298</sup>

In another attempt towards reconciliation and cooperation with the GCC, Zarif reiterated his views in another article, titled "Choose your neighbors before your house," days after the nuclear negotiations ended in 2015. He argued that Iran had taken sincere steps at enhancing relations, as he paid official visits to Kuwait, Qatar and Iraq, right after the historic Iranian nuclear deal was concluded in Vienna.<sup>299</sup> Reasoning for a constructive relationship, Zarif further asserts in the article:

We, the countries of the region and the Middle East, have many common denominators in terms of religion, culture, politics and geography. We have what it takes to build constructive and useful cooperation for our people and the people of the world. We face several challenges and our path is fraught with dangers; therefore, we should not let ourselves get carried away with sectarian and personal disputes.<sup>300</sup>

Foreign Minister Zarif built on his previously proposed forum for regional dialogue, and presented a set of mutually acceptable norms required for the implementation of such a setting in the same article. By arguing the importance of establishing a regional platform, Zarif aimed at instituting a new regional order, one that adheres to international norms and principles, while takes advantage of the inherent and newly discovered opportunities between neighboring countries. Zarif insists that his proposed plan is "a bright path toward reform and amicable relations between brothers and the members of one family that have become estranged from one another for some time."<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Our Neighbors Are Our Priority," *Ashraq Al-Awsat*, November 21, 2013.

<sup>299</sup> Zarif, "Choose Your Neighbors"

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

Mohammad Javad Zarif's propositions have been consistent in his almost four years as Iran's Foreign Minister. However, as Ambassador Wahba argues, "there is a clear understanding that Iran does not have one voice," and that the "consensus on the Arab side is that the more negative and aggressive side is where the power is in Iran and it is not the Zarif and the Rouhani voices that they consider more moderate and more willing to an open dialogue with the Arab countries."<sup>302</sup> This leader centric view on Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf is essential in understanding the variations in foreign policies since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and illustrative of the unpredictability the change in leadership bears. Ambassador Wahba recollected an exchange with an Arab official who told her that "if we only had to deal with Zarif all the time, we would be very happy, but we do not talk to Zarif, we talk to the other guys who have a very different tone."<sup>303</sup> Certainly, however, following the end of Rouhani's presidency in 2017 or 2021 (depending on the outcome of the May 2017 elections), the transition of power will include a change in foreign policy approach that will most likely be less accommodating than the Rouhani-Zarif initiatives.

Iran's diplomatic outreach in the almost four years of the Rouhani Administration did not yield positive results, and were mostly sidelined with the growing dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia since January 2016. This lack of success in diplomatic engagement with Arab neighbors also protracted Iran's global reconciliation efforts post-lifting of international sanctions. The January 2017 mediation measure undertaken by the Foreign Minister of Kuwait, a visit which President Rouhani reciprocated to Kuwait City as well as Muscat, demonstrates a newfound capacity for a successful platform for engagement. It is expected that with Rouhani's victory in the May 2017 presidential elections, his foreign policy team will give priority to

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<sup>302</sup> Wahba, "Interview"

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

resolving regional conflicts and more seriously attempt at engaging the GCC countries. However, the candidates that challenge his presidency have illustrated their lack of desire for the continuation of the foreign policies of the Rouhani era; casting doubt on the future geopolitics of the Persian Gulf.

### The Repercussions of the Execution of Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr

The execution of Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr had wide-ranging and far-reaching consequences for the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf, and dramatically altered the bilateral and multilateral relations between Iran and the GCC countries. Sheikh Nimr, a prominent Shi'a cleric from the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, was executed by authorities on January 2, 2016, along with forty-six other Saudi Arabian citizens. From 1979, Nimr studied for fifteen years in the religious city of Qom in Iran, where many Shi'a clerics go to learn and rise in clerical ranks.<sup>304</sup> Upon his return to Saudi Arabia he became a staunch defender of the rights of the Shi'a, and continuously protested against the monarchy's domestic and foreign policies. Like most other Shi'a in the region, Nimr was perceived to be an Iranian agent, and in 2012, he was arrested on terrorism-related charges.<sup>305</sup> With his arrest, his "popularity soared," and after he was sentenced to death in 2014, wide scale protests erupted in the Eastern Province and across Shi'a communities.<sup>306</sup>

After his execution in 2016, demonstrations were seen in Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, and in front of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad.<sup>307</sup> These late-night protests in Iran spiraled into protestors storming the embassy, and

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<sup>304</sup> David Graham, "Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the Forgotten Shiites of Saudi Arabia," *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2016.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.



setting it on fire. Even though President Rouhani and other leading Iranian figures strongly condemned the protests, arresting over seventy protesters, the incident elicited a strong reaction from the Saudis.<sup>308</sup> Saudi Arabia immediately cut off all diplomatic, commercial, and travel ties with Iran, urging the entire region, and the world, to follow suit. The Saudis shocked both Iran and the region with their decision, especially because the Saudi Embassy was empty at the time of the attack, and Iran took measures to prevent further escalation of the unrest. As Zarif stated in response to Saudi Arabia's measures, Iran could have severed relations after the Mina tragedy during the 2015 Hajj, when more than four-hundred Iranian pilgrims were crushed to death, or after the molestation of Iranian teens at the Riyadh Airport earlier that summer.<sup>309</sup> Saudi Arabia seemingly utilized the situation to escalate and reinforce the conflict with Iran, and attempted at hindering the JCPOA exactly two weeks before the agreement's implementation.

Table 2. Diplomatic Reactions by the GCC Countries in Response to the Dispute Between Iran and Saudi Arabia

<b>Country</b>	<b>Diploamtic Reaction</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	Severed Diplomatic, Commercial, and Economic Relations
<b>Kuwait</b>	Recalled Ambassador from Tehran
<b>Oman</b>	Condemned the attack at Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran
<b>Qatar</b>	Recalled Ambassador from Tehran
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	Severed Diplomatic, Commercial, and Economic Relations
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	Downgraded diplomatic representation to Charges D'affaires

<sup>308</sup> Arash Karami, "What does Khamenei think of Saudi Embassy attacks?" *Al Monitor*, January 4, 2016.

<sup>309</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Saudi Arabia' Reckless Extremism," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2016.

By portraying Iran as a violator of international diplomatic law, the Saudis sought to remind the world of a similar Iranian action in the past: the seizure of the United States Embassy and diplomats following the 1979 revolution. The situation worsened when loyal regional and African countries joined Saudi Arabia's decision to sever or downgrade diplomatic relations with Iran. Bahrain, Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia cut all diplomatic relations, while the UAE downgraded its diplomatic representation to a charge d'affaires.<sup>310</sup> Kuwait and Qatar recalled their envoys, and Oman remained neutral, as illustrated in Table 2.

The variance in reactions are directly linked to bilateral interests between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf as detailed in chapter 2. Undoubtedly, the events that occurred in the first week of January 2016 were focal in the escalation of direct conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia with far-reaching reverberations throughout the region.

Iran suffered a huge diplomatic loss in the wake of the embassy attack. The Arab League, a twenty-two-member body, with the exception of Lebanon, condemned the actions in Iran.<sup>311</sup> Similarly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which met in Istanbul, Turkey, on April 15, 2016, also condemned Iran's actions. Despite President Rouhani's presence at the opening of the conference, by incorporating other issues, "the Conference deplored "Iran's interference in the internal affairs of the states of the region and other member states including Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia," and "its continued support for terrorism."<sup>312</sup> These regional and international actions against Iran that have been led by Saudi Arabia affixed a perilous rivalry between the two major powers of the Persian Gulf. Iran and Saudi Arabia ushered in a new era of contentious relations far more severe than previously witnessed periodic tensions. The rivalry

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<sup>310</sup> Malek, "Recalls Ambassador"

<sup>311</sup> "Arab League condemns Iranian 'meddling' in Arab affairs." *Al Jazeera America*. January 10, 2016.

<sup>312</sup> "Islamic summit condemns Iran over terror support," *The National*, April 16, 2016.

between Iran and Saudi Arabia for dominance and influence in the Persian Gulf and the wider region has had a clearly direct impact in the intensification of regional conflicts, particularly in Syria and Yemen, and has given rise to sectarian and identity politics which have divided the people of the region.

### Rise of Sectarian and Identity Politics

It is very important to differentiate how Iran is perceived among the public in each of the Arab states of the GCC. Even though Iran's popularity soared during the presidency of Ahmadinejad because of his ostentatious statements against the United States and Israel, Iran's apparent involvement in regional conflicts, as well the perceived sect-based policies of the country has severely damaged Iran's image in the Arab streets.<sup>313</sup> As Warnaar argues, while Iran is in some contexts "the main 'other' against which Arab identity gets shape," in other Arab contexts Iran "can be the Islamic 'brother' which shares anti-Zionist and anti-hegemonic identities."<sup>314</sup> However, in a poll conducted in January 2013, it is clear that since the start of the nuclear negotiations, Iran has been viewed mostly negatively, with Saudi Arabia leading the GCC countries with "an overwhelming majority of its citizens - 84 percent - saying they did not feel positive about Iran, followed by Qatar with 79 percent, the UAE with 69 percent, Oman with 57 percent, Bahrain with 56 percent and Kuwait with 50 percent."<sup>315</sup> While there is a variation in public opinions, ultimately Iran does not have a positive standing among the people of the GCC

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<sup>313</sup> Ashraf Kishk, *Gulf-Iranian Relations: Facts & Future Perspectives* (Bahrain: Center for Strategic International and Energy Studies, March 2014)

<sup>314</sup> Warnaar, et al., "Iran's Relations"

<sup>315</sup> Kishk, "Gulf-Iranian Relations"

countries. As Lynch puts it, we are witnessing the cementing of a “sectarian worldview” among the people in the region.<sup>316</sup>

This section delves into the mythical and real aspects of sectarianism and investigates the influence of identity politics in the rise of regional tensions. Sectarianism is not a myth and they exist ever since the passing of Prophet Mohammad. The rudimentary view that sectarianism automatically leads to primordial hatred and antagonism is the fallacy. Arguably the recent sectarian conflicts are influenced by political objectives of regional powers, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, and sectarian differences are instrumentalized to mobilize support and justify as well as legitimize political actions. Furthermore, I argue that rather than looking at the conflict with a sectarian perspective, the thrust of the resentments must be viewed as a Persian-Arab identity conflict. Through this viewpoint, the myth of perpetual sectarianism is invalidated and the root causes of the dispute are realized.

The sectarian dispute between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims started fourteen centuries ago following the demise of Prophet Mohammad, and as a result, multiple schools of thought have prevailed in Islam. The keyword here is *dispute*, which does not automatically result in perpetual conflict. Sunni Muslims are divided into four major branches of Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi’i, and Maleki, which form the majority of the global Muslim population. They all reject the Shi’s assertion that Prophet Mohammad named a successor, and believe in the leadership of the four Caliphs who were elected by the elders after his death. Hence, they also differ in their credence of succession thereafter. From a U.S. foreign policy perspective, the primary reasons for the negative connotations associated with Shi’a among the Sunni include “the widely-held view that Shi’a are polytheists and that they commit apostasy by practicing some of their worship

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<sup>316</sup> Masry, “Changing the Lens”

activities.”<sup>317</sup> This did not prevent peaceful coexistence in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, or any other country until a policy based on identity politics was introduced by government officials or religious leaders.

The Shi’a believe in the accession of the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali Ibn-Abitaleb, following the death of prophet Mohammad, and the succession of his bloodline as the rulers of Islam. Shi’a Muslims are either Jafaris or Ismailis, while having several sub-branches, which contradict many aspects of one other. Twelvers, Alavis, and Alawites are among the Jafari jurisprudence of Shi’a Muslims which differ in the belief of the line of succession of Imams and interpretations of the *Sonnat*. The Ismailis, Zaidis, and Druze deviate from the Jafaris in the succession after the sixth Imam and follow a different lineage. In Twelver Shi’a doctrine, according to Foucault’s understanding of Iran, “there is the principle that truth was not completed and sealed by the last Prophet. After Mohammad, another cycle of revelation begins, the unfinished cycle of the Imams.”<sup>318</sup> While differences between Sunnis and Shi’as are significant, Iran bases its relations with other nations on strategic interests rather than sectarian preferences; and the same can be said about other regional countries’ geopolitical decision making.

### Myth of Sectarianism

The innate differences between religious beliefs of the Shi’a and Sunni has periodically led to conflicts, however, the mere existence of different sects has not inhibited peaceful

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<sup>317</sup> United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *July-December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report Saudi Arabia*, September 13, 2011

<sup>318</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming About,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* ed. by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005)

coexistence between the varying religious groups in the more than fourteen centuries since the establishment of Islam. Iran states that it does not form relations based on its Shi'a identity, but instead, argues that relations are formed based on shared resistance to foreign domination.<sup>319</sup> As inscribed in the constitution, and as Ambassador Sohrabi puts it, "the Islamic regime adopted a strategy with the primary goal of helping those in need all around the world. While this is based on Islamic principles, it is not bound to the Muslim world or different sects."<sup>320</sup> Evident by Iran's assistance to Sunni Bosniaks and Palestinians, Christian Armenians and Venezuelans, as well as the Shi'a minorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Today on an envisaged mainstream Islamic spectrum, if Iran as a Shi'a, Twelver, and *Usuli* State is considered on the far left, Saudi Arabia as a Sunni state from the Hanbali branch with a Wahhabi ideology can be positioned on the far right of that spectrum. Thereby, all other Muslim states lie somewhere in between in terms of belief and ideology. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia have the widest divergence in their interpretation of Islam. As the greatest political manifestation of these religious sects, this disparity between the two regional powers has played a crucial role in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. From Lebanon and Yemen, to Palestine and Afghanistan, the two regional rivals have increased their presence and influence in these arenas, further widening sectarian divisions.

The institutionalized sectarian based politics by influential regional and international countries have promoted disunity in once unified countries by fabricating divisions among the people. Masry argues in this regard that, "it is arguably power politics being played at the top, what is trickling down to the battlefield and the masses is poisonous sectarian and ethnic bigotry,

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<sup>319</sup> Warnaar, et al., "Iran's Relations"

<sup>320</sup> Sohrabi, "Interview"

wreaking havoc within previously harmonious, if heterogeneous, societies.”<sup>321</sup> In Iraq, or any other country in the region, sectarian divides were never a major concern for interfaith marriages, trade interdependence, or social interactions, and the Shi’a and Sunnis have peacefully coexisted for centuries, and rarely have sectarian tensions grown to today’s level, with the last major conflict occurring in 1801.<sup>322</sup> The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the ensuing chaos in Iraq arguably brought about the reemergence of sectarian divisions there and across the region, far worse than the war of rhetoric during the Iranian revolution and the subsequent war between Iran and Iraq. As Haddad posits after the fall of Saddam Hussein, identity politics gained prominence in Iraq:

The sharp deterioration from the ‘default setting’ of sectarian coexistence to the exception of sectarian violence was unlike anything experienced in living Iraqi memory. In effect, the impossible had happened: sectarian identity, in and of itself, rather than, for example, affiliation to a political grouping associated with a particular sect, became the cause and target of unbridled violence.<sup>323</sup>

Geopolitical alliances in the region, specifically based on sectarian interests, have had great influence on the formation of divisions in the Middle East. Iraq is one arena in which both Shi’a Iran and Sunni Arab states have invested heavily to pursue their own national interests, further dividing the Iraqi people into different sects based on allegiances.<sup>324</sup> The rivalry for dominance in Iraq fueled the sectarian civil war after the removal of Saddam Hussein, and has perpetuated the devastating situation in the country, even fourteen years later. Furthermore, the growing divisions in the Iraqi society created the vacuum that gave rise to extremist groups such as Daesh.

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<sup>321</sup> Masry, “Changing the Lens”

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Haddad, “Sectarian Relations”

<sup>324</sup> Zubaida, “Sectarian Dimensions”

What further complicates the situation is that Iran, as the country's previous adversary, benefited the most from Saddam Hussein's fall. This advantage gets associated with Iran's Shi'a identity, and thus results in sectarian divisions into 'Iran loyalists' or 'Ba'athist extremists,' forcing the moderate population to ascribe to either side and leading to antagonisms toward the others. Moreover, Zubaida argues that "the Shi'a oppositionists [within the GCC countries] are cast as agents of Iran and foreign powers," and Iran is cast as attempting to subvert and meddle in the internal affairs of the region.<sup>325</sup> As a result of Iran's rising influence, the status quo geopolitics of the region dramatically shifted, as the once protectorate of the Arab world against Iranian influence was overthrown and the new system of governance that replaced that of Saddam Hussein's is now more accommodating to the Islamic Republic; "ringing alarm bells for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regimes, and their Sunni Wahhabi constituencies."<sup>326</sup> Since 2003, this dynamic between Iran and Saudi Arabia has escalated to a multi-layered conflict. As Ambassador Wahba argued during the interview:

I think that the war in Iraq has had a huge impact on how the region perceives Iran. With the change of government after the war, and given that the majority are the Shi'a in Iraq, and given the many years of what I consider and what many consider a sectarian and partisan leader like Maliki, I believe there is a perception that Iraq has almost become an extension of Iran. The most powerful country in Iraq is not the U.S., is not Saudi Arabia that is for sure, it is Iran.<sup>327</sup>

These political maneuverings, however, do not constitute as merely sectarian, rather the actions by Iran and the Arab states constitutes as identity politics that are utilized in advancing respective national interests. Viewing the disputes and contentions in the Persian Gulf as Persian versus Arab identity politics more accurately depicts the realities that exist, instead of trying to

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Wahba, "Interview"



enforce divisions based on religious sects as the inherent reasons. Iranian identity has developed in contrast to an Arab identity over the past fourteen centuries. The purging of Arabic-derived words from the Persian language, the growing importance of the survival and spread of Shi'aism, and the great value invested in Persian history and civilization have been key factors in shaping Iranian identity and in a greater context, their view of Arabs.

In Iranian literature prior to the revolution, Arabs are not viewed positively. For example, Sadegh Hedayat refers to the Arabs as the “Other,” and Sadegh Chubak attributes Iranian dissent toward Arabs to “the fact that Arab Muslims destroyed a great Iranian civilization” which “cut Persians and Iranians off from their own, true Iranian history, art, and culture.”<sup>328</sup> Such resentments have arguably taken root in Iranian identity and conversely in Arab identities as well. The start of Iran's Shi'a and identity formulation can be traced back to the Safavid Empire in the start of the 16th century. A prominent Iranian poet, Abol Ghasem Ferdowsi, wrote an epic at that time to purge Arabic words from the Farsi language, instituting antagonistic sentiments toward Arabs.<sup>329</sup> However, the fact that such bitter perceptions had existed for centuries without a conflict demonstrates the myth of perpetual sectarian conflict.

Since the Islamic revolution, Iranian official education curriculum never refers to Arabs and other Sunni Muslims in a negative manner. As Malekzadeh argues, “The logic of the revolution meant that Iran aspired to take on the leadership of the world's Muslims. Its educational planners could ill afford to draw distinctions between Iran and the rest of the world. Islam, rather than Shiism, provided the essential building blocks.”<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Barrett, “Iran”

<sup>329</sup> *‘Basi ranj bordam dar in saal si, ajam zendeh kardam bedin Parsi’* translates to “I have endured much suffering in the past thirty years, to revive the Iranian culture with the Parsi (Farsi) language.” – Hakim Abol Ghassem Ferdowsi

<sup>330</sup> Malekzadeh, “Iran's textbooks”

In the Arab world, however, sectarianism has proved to be “a powerful mobilizer.”<sup>331</sup> Iran has been portrayed as the “regional boogeyman” in media, official and unofficial rhetoric, coupled with the negative connotations that have been ascribed to the Shi’a in the majority of these countries.<sup>332</sup> Furthermore, in a study of Arab school books, “the Iranian was represented as the mean racist Persian who conspires against the unity of the Arab nation.”<sup>333</sup> Siegel’s online and twitter research shows that the Shi’a in general are referred to as the Hizb Al Shaytan (party of the devil), Majus (derogatory referral to Zoroastrianism), Safawi (pejorative reference to the Safavid Empire), and Rafidha (refers to Twelver Shias who rejected “true” Islam); all representing aspects of Iranian identity.<sup>334</sup> The pairing of the Shi’a and Iranians as one disregards the many different ethnicities and nationalities that follow the Shi’a school of thought while having no connections to Iran. Furthermore, Masry claims, “It is now common place for Sunni clerics in the Persian Gulf to warn of the “Shiitization” of the Middle East.”<sup>335</sup> This rise of sectarian policies that have led to the normalization of anti-Shi’a and anti-Iran rhetoric is a barrier to the betterment of people to people relations, as well as diminishes the prospects for constructive cooperation in the future.

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<sup>331</sup> Masry, “Changing the Lens”

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Warnaar, et al., “Iran’s Relations”

<sup>334</sup> Alexandra Siegel, *Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2015)

<sup>335</sup> Masry, “Changing the Lens”

### Security Dimensions

Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other GCC countries are all involved, in one way or another, in the conflicts across the region and beyond. From Afghanistan and Pakistan to Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Iran and GCC countries have been involved in direct and indirect confrontation, especially since the Arab uprisings in 2011, and further fueled by the end of Iran's isolation through the JCPOA. While officially all GCC countries welcomed the JCPOA, their dissent was evident in their repeated assertions that other Iranian actions should have also been considered in the negotiations. As Ambassador Wahba argues,

There is no doubt that many in the region felt very strongly and feel very strongly until today on the Arab side, that the agreement isolated just the nuclear portfolio and did not deal with the regional behavior of Iran, and that is where they are upset. They were not against the agreement, they were against the fact that the agreement was very limited.<sup>336</sup>

This runs counter to the assertions by Catherine Ashton, the lead negotiator for the European Union and coordinator of the nuclear negotiations, who argued that the mandate by the UNSC was to resolve the nuclear dossier, and that “other countries did not wish us to start engaging in broader questions that really affected them and not the people in the [negotiating] room.”<sup>337</sup> The JCPOA would not have been possible if other issues were incorporated into the negotiations, and for its part, the Islamic Republic would not have accepted to engage in negotiations over other issues.

The growing chances of an official détente between Iran and the United States under the presidencies of Hassan Rouhani and Barack Obama, further threatened those enjoying the status quo. As Gause posits: “Persian Gulf countries need assurances from the United States as they have seen the fate of the Shah of Iran a close ally, and are worried about the possible

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<sup>336</sup> Wahba, “Interview”

<sup>337</sup> Panel Discussion. *U.S.- Iran Relations: Opportunities for the New Administration* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, March 22, 2017)

rapprochement between Iran and the U.S.,” and the inevitable shifts in the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf.<sup>338</sup> The schism between some GCC countries and the United States, especially during the negotiations, further complicated and prolonged the persistent regional conflicts. Other GCC countries, nominally Oman, served as the major hurdle in Saudi Arabia’s desire for a unified GCC military in December 2013, just two months after the official interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1, which led to the JCPOA.<sup>339</sup> This resulted in more security assurances from the United States, as well as a more harmonized anti-Iran rhetoric since the inauguration of Donald Trump among some of the Persian Gulf countries.

Table 3. Military Budget and Military Personnel in Iran and the GCC Countries (2014 Data)

<b>Country</b>	<b>Military Budget (Billion Dollars)</b>	<b>Military Personnel</b>
<b>Iran</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>532,000</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	1.3	8,200
<b>Kuwait</b>	4.8	15,500
<b>Oman</b>	9.6	42,600
<b>Qatar</b>	3.7	11,800
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	80.7	233,500
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	13.4	51,000
<b>GCC Total</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>1,071,400</b>

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<sup>338</sup> Gause, “Oil Monarchies”

<sup>339</sup> Kholaiif, “Oman”

According to 2014 data, within the GCC, there are just over 360,000 troops. The vast majority are in Saudi Arabia at 233,500; UAE and Oman come second with 51,000 and 42,600 troops. Whereas, Iran has more than 530,000 active military personnel.<sup>340</sup> However, as illustrated in Table 3, these numbers are not illustrative of the actual military might in the region, and while Iran supersedes the collective GCC military personnel, the budget allocated to military spending in the GCC exceeds that of Iran's by more than seven times.<sup>341</sup> While some spending has decreased due to the decline in oil prices, the majority of the GCC countries have increased their military budget. The reasons for this expansion are Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's involvement in Yemen, the dangers posed by Daesh, and perceived threats from the Islamic Republic.

This section analyzes the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly focusing on Syria and Yemen to elucidate the regional security dimensions, and the centrality of geopolitical interests and capacities among Iran and the Persian Gulf states.

### Syria

Syria has become one of the most contentious arenas for Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the rivalry for dominance on the ground and during the diplomatic process has torpedoed the political negotiations to end the conflict. Even though the Syrian conflict started in 2011 as a result of the uprising across the Arab world, the conflict in Syria is not just a civil war. The Syrian government is not only facing the Syrian people who oppose the government, but also several terrorist groups, including Daesh and Jebhat Al Nusrah. Furthermore, each conflicting side in Syria has different regional and international patrons active in advancing their respective national interests, where Iran and Russia support the Assad government, and Saudi Arabia,

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<sup>340</sup> Kishk, "Gulf-Iranian Relations"

<sup>341</sup> Alia Chughtai, "GCC military spending spree," *Al Jazeera*, June 4, 2016.

Qatar, the United States, along with their allies, support the Syrian opposition groups. The complexity and the growing web of actors and their allegiances continues to expand as all sides are also engaged in combating the terrorist groups.

For the Islamic Republic, the geo-strategic significance of Syria is twofold. Syria has proven its loyalty on multiple occasions since the Iranian revolution, and the country's proximity to Lebanon adds to its importance in Iran's regional objectives. The current seemingly enduring alliance between Iran and Syria dates back to the Iran-Iraq War, during the presidency of Hafez Assad who was among the very few who supported Iran against Saddam Hussein, especially in the Arab world. Furthermore, with the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and its strategic alliance with Iran, which serves the Iranian interest in countering Israel, is facilitated through direct interactions from Syria. While Hafez Assad and the leaders in Iran were not always on the same side, Bashar Assad's accession to power in 2000 and Syria's growing amicable relations with Hezbollah instituted a new era of strategic, political, and economic relations between the Islamic Republic and the Syrian government.

Aside from the geo-strategic location of Syria and its proximity to Hezbollah and Israel which are the most important aspects of Iran's interests in Syria, the religious commonalities between the Alawites, which are a minority in Syria, and the Twelver Shi'a, are also factors that deepen the bilateral relationship. The Iranian protectorates of the Shrines, who are fighting against terrorist outfits in Syria, have one mandate and that is to defend the Shrine of Hazrat Zeynab, the granddaughter of Prophet Mohammad and the daughter of Imam Ali. These Shi'a dimensions are important as they help explain the Iranian justification for presence in Syria's sacred sites and the Islamic Republic's collaboration with the Syrian government and Hezbollah on the ground. However, as mentioned earlier, the religious aspect can be interpreted as a

facilitator for Iran's presence and strategic aspirations in Syria, but not the primary reason for the Islamic Republic's involvement.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the two most active members of the GCC in the Syrian conflict, have been arming, financing, and assisting in the training of rebels and opposition groups fighting the Assad government, not in total lockstep with each other.<sup>342</sup> Moreover, Saudi Arabia has spearheaded the Arab world's efforts in Syria in collaboration with the United States, and has repeatedly expressed its desire for regime change and an end to the Assad presidency. As Foreign Minister Al Jubair asserted, "Assad has to leave at the beginning of the [transitional] process."<sup>343</sup> Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Qatar and the UAE's involvement in the Syrian conflict is not only to ensure a political process, but among their top priorities is to counter Iran and hamper its ties with Hezbollah, the group the Arab League and the GCC have designated as a terrorist organization. In that view, Wagner and Cafiero argue,

Saudi Arabia's role in the Syria conflict is driven by several regional and domestic objectives, from destroying the Syria-Iran alliance to distracting the Saudi population from domestic problems," and as "74 percent of Syrians practice Sunni Islam, the Saudi government would like to use its religious authority and economic resources to acquire influence over a post-Assad order, at Tehran and Hezbollah's expense."<sup>344</sup>

The Sunni dimension also plays an important role in Saudi Arabia's approach in Syria, making the Kingdom's principal objective a change in government that secures an end to Iranian presence, and ensures the Alawites do not remain in power. Thus, the opposition of interests and different aspirations are evident between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and tensions have continued to increase as the Syrian conflict has entered its seventh year. The contrasting policies have led to a

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<sup>342</sup> Daniel Wagner and Giorgio Cafiero, "Saudi Arabia's Dark Role in the Syrian Conflict," *The Huffington Post*, June 7, 2013.

<sup>343</sup> "Saudi FM reiterates: Assad must go at start of transitional process," *Al Arabiya*, March 5, 2016.

<sup>344</sup> Wagner et al., "Dark Role"

cycle of conflict that keep circulating, ad infinitum, until all sides earnestly accept the ultimate decision by the Syrian people.

## Yemen

Iran and Saudi Arabia's roles are reversed in the conflict in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, along with its GCC partners, supports the UN recognized government of Yemen, and Iran backs the opposition group, albeit in completely different ways than in Syria. Saudi Arabia and the UAE's military involvement, in sync with the United States, has had dire impact for the two GCC countries' regional, and more importantly domestic policies. Iran's indirect involvement in Yemen, on the other hand, is limited to moral and political support for the opposition, while at the same time, Saudi Arabia and its partners have repeatedly alleged that Iran has provided military and financial assistance to the Houthi opposition. The challenges in Yemen, as a relatively new arena for conflict between Iran and the GCC countries, has exacerbated with the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm against civilian and military targets in Yemen, which has consequently caused wide-ranging humanitarian crisis in the already poorest country in the Middle East.<sup>345</sup>

The conflict in Yemen also started with the Arab uprising in 2011, however, the armed insurgency and protests are also linked to the country's recent history. South and North Yemen unified as the Republic of Yemen in 1990, when the President of the North, Ali Abdullah Saleh, remained President of the unified government until February 2012. The GCC helped broker a deal with President Saleh for a peaceful political transition in Yemen, and it was through the GCC Initiative in Riyadh that Saleh stepped down and transferred power to his deputy

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<sup>345</sup> Ahmed Al Haj, "Yemen civil war: 10,000 civilians killed and 40,000 injured in conflict, UN reveals," *The Independent*, January 17, 2017.



Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.<sup>346</sup> Even though the initiative was not able to provide long term stability, it was a success for the GCC as a whole, especially in proving its capacity to mediate external conflicts. However, military engagement by Saudi Arabia and the UAE shifted the nature of the situation in Yemen to a direct military conflict and shattered hopes for a peaceful resolution.

The full extent of the relations between the Islamic Republic and the Houthis is disputed. President Rouhani, during a frank discussion with representatives from think tanks, academics and NGOs at the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, 2015, explained his views on Iran's role in Yemen and relationship with the Houthis by saying "the truth is that we didn't do anything special in Yemen," and that "we do not see a complete government control by the Houthis in Yemen as the best solution either."<sup>347</sup> In regard to Iran's relations with the Houthis, President Rouhani further added:

For a long time, we never thought, quite frankly, that the Houthis would be able to take over Sanaa. They always had influence. But from day one, we always suggested to the Houthis to sit down and talk and carry out a dialogue and negotiate with their political rivals and form a coalition and unity government. The Houthis were never seeking to control the entirety of the Yemeni government, and that is not what they're seeking today either.

Clearly, however, Iran's involvement in the conflict in Yemen has further fueled the tensions between the Islamic Republic and the GCC countries. The escalation of the conflict in Yemen has been very costly for Saudi Arabia and its GCC coalition partners, and as the war drags on their investment and involvement will continue to grow. Consequently, the conflict in Yemen has allowed the resurfacing of grievances between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian

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<sup>346</sup> Maged Al Madhaji, "How Yemen's post-2011 transitional phase ended in war," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, May 19, 2016.

<sup>347</sup> Remarks by President Rouhani during a Discussion with Representatives from U.S. Think Tanks, Academics and NGOs at the Sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, *New York, United States*, September 27, 2015

Gulf, and the war of words has inflated in parallel to the actual war, that as of January 2017 resulted in more than ten thousand civilian deaths along with forty thousand wounded, and more than six million on the verge of famine.<sup>348</sup> As an example, with a rarely seen tone, Ayatollah Khamenei likened the Saudis actions to that of Israel by stating that “what the government of Saudi Arabia is doing in Yemen is exactly the same thing that the Zionists are doing in Gaza,”<sup>349</sup> expressing clear anger and resentment towards the Saudi airstrikes in Yemen. Furthermore, in the same speech, the Supreme Leader argued that the people of Yemen will not allow the Saudis to succeed, and that:

The chances for the Saudis to achieve victory in Yemen would be zero. In the present time, their chances are less than zero. So, they will definitely receive a blow. Without a doubt, their noses will be rubbed in dirt.... Shia, Sunni, Shafi'i, Zaidi, Hanafi and all types have stood up against the enemy's invasion and by Allah's favor, they will achieve victory.<sup>350</sup>

The social divisions in Yemen plays an important role in the prolongation of the conflict, where the Houthis, a Zaydi Shi'a group, are the primary opposition to the government of President Hadi, and are supported by the former President Saleh. Due to the relationship between the Houthis and Iran, the concerns by Saudi Arabia is manifold in Yemen. As a result, this conflict has added to the frictions between Iran and the GCC countries, as well as the Arab world more broadly. Various GCC officials have condemned the Islamic Republic's 'interference' in Yemen on multiple occasions, and the Saudi Foreign Minister, for example, elucidated the Kingdom's view on the Iranian role by stating “the Iranians have sent supplies and weapons and

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<sup>348</sup> “WFP Launches New Emergency Operation In Yemen To Feed Millions On Brink Of Famine,” *World Food Program*, April 12, 2017.

<sup>349</sup> Remarks by Ayatollah Khamenei at a Meeting with Islamic Panegyrists. *Tehran, Iran*. April 9, 2015

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

money and personnel to support the Houthis in Yemen so that they can takeover Yemen and present a threat to Saudi Arabia.”<sup>351</sup>

This statement by the Supreme Leader, reiterated the Islamic Republic’s official position on providing assistance to the oppressed people in the Muslim world and beyond. However, one cannot disregard the importance of the religious commonalities and political maneuverings to counter Saudi Arabia and its partners in the region. Furthermore, this statement was made two months after Iran sent a humanitarian cargo in May 2015 with food and medical supplies to through the United Nations to Yemen, in defiance of the Saudi blockade of Yemeni ports.<sup>352</sup> At this time tensions were at their peak between Iran and the GCC countries. A case in point illustrates this escalation in contentions: the Saudi air force along with coalition partners had bombed the Yemeni airports and runways to make it impossible for Iranian airliners to land, as they were determined to prevent any shipment originating from Iran under the suspicion that it would include weapons for the Houthis.<sup>353</sup>

In contrast Saudi Arabia’s sentiments and allegations, Iran has officially rejected any military involvement, while also expressing support for the “oppressed people of Yemen.”<sup>354</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei once again directly commented on the situation in Yemen and the growing allegations against the Islamic Republic at length in a televised address on August 17, 2015:

The war in Yemen is a political war, not a religious one. They falsely claim that the issue is about Shia and Sunni while this is not the case.... We will support all those people who help unity and we will oppose all those who act against unity. We will support all the oppressed. We will not leave the arena just because they say that we interfered in the

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<sup>351</sup> Interview with Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair, *CNBC*, January 5, 2016

<sup>352</sup> “Ship Carrying Iran’s Yemen-Bound Relief Aid Delivers Cargo to UN in Djibouti,” *Fars News*, May 23, 2015.

<sup>353</sup> Mohammed Ghobari and Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Saudi-led planes bomb Sanaa airport to stop Iranian plane landing,” *Reuters*, April 28, 2015.

<sup>354</sup> Remarks by Ayatollah Khamenei to Members of Ahlul Bayt World Assembly and Islamic Radio and TV Union. *Tehran, Iran*. August 17, 2015

affairs of other countries. We did not interfere at all, but we will support them. We feel for the oppressed people of Bahrain and Yemen. We pray for them and we will offer any kind of help we can.<sup>355</sup>

Viewing the situation in Yemen as merely a sectarian conflict, disregards the legitimate grievances that exists among various elements of Yemeni society. The Zaidi Shi'a sect and the Shafi'i branches of Sunni Islam "harmoniously lived together and prayed in the same mosques for hundreds of years," Vall argues. Despite the heavy rhetoric on both sides, the only possible solution in Yemen is an inclusive inter-Yemeni dialogue with the goal of a unified nation. The GCC countries will benefit most from an end to the conflict in Yemen, due to their proximity, costly involvement, and shared commonalities with the country, much more than the Islamic Republic with its limited investments and minimal political capital in Yemen would. Nevertheless, the fate of Yemen is also linked to the bilateral and multilateral relations between Iran and the GCC member states, and until a sustainable resolution to the Yemeni conflict is implemented through the United Nations peace process, it is hard to imagine the betterment of relations between Iran and the Arab states.

### Foreign Interference

The Persian Gulf, which holds more than fifty-five percent of the global oil, and more than forty percent of global gas reserves, has an important geo-strategic location, and as one the most important trading regions in the world, it hosts hundreds of international cargo ships daily.<sup>356</sup> The Persian Gulf is an area for global interdependence, and its security and stability is

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> "Persian Gulf Oil & Gas Exports Fact Sheet," *Marcon International*, 2008

of interest to not just Iran and the GCC countries, but also to the entire international community. This interdependence, however, is contingent on the cooperation of the eight littoral states surrounding the Persian Gulf. Iran's constitutionally bound policy of resisting foreign domination and the increasing levels of tension between the Islamic Republic and the new U.S. administration, is opposed to the friendly relation between the GCC countries and the United States. This section looks at the role of the United States and other world powers in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the recently unraveled secret back channel talks on reconciliation efforts and joint security concerns between Israel and the GCC countries is a cause of concern as it is one of the few avenues which has the potential to lead to an escalated and long-term conflict in the region.

#### United States Military Presence in the Persian Gulf

The U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf are not only confined to oil and the free flow of global energy products, but also include a large military presence in the GCC countries. The way Iran perceives American presence in the region has largely framed its foreign policies since 1979. The contentions between Iran and the United States at the time of the revolution, the subsequent hostage crises, and the Iran-Iraq War, further strengthened the Islamic Republic's ideological and political opposition to the United States. Once one of the most important allies of the United States, the Shah's ouster forced the change in U.S. policy in the region leading to increased partnerships and collaborations with the GCC countries. Consequently, the United States military presence in the Persian Gulf and the sale of military equipment to GCC states are a primary Iranian concern. As stated by Ambassador Sohrabi:

“The West has had a praying view of the Persian Gulf because of the oil and gas reserves.... None came here for the sake of helping the countries, more than one hundred military ships in the Persian Gulf is to augment the sales of military equipment to

countries that do not have the expertise required to even handle them, but intend to further perpetuate conflict in the region.”<sup>357</sup>

Iranians and the Iranian leadership view the purchase of U.S. military equipment by the GCC countries as a directly targeted at, and threat against, the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, since the Iran-Iraq War and the preceding hostage crisis in Tehran, the American policy in the region is designed to counter Iran’s actions in the Persian Gulf and its influence in the region. With the start of the ‘War on Terror’ the U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf has surged alongside increased cooperation with GCC countries. Aside from purely economic and symbolic military collaborations, the new era compelled resolute security coordination and cooperation.

As the end of the nuclear negotiations was approaching, President Obama met with GCC leaders at Camp David to reassure the Arab countries of U.S. intentions and the many positive aspects of the JCPOA. In a statement following the meeting, President Obama argued that the “purpose of security cooperation is not to perpetuate any long-term confrontation with Iran or even to marginalize Iran. None of our nations have an interest in an open-ended conflict with Iran.”<sup>358</sup> President Obama’s remarks standing next the GCC countries and awaiting finalization of the JCPOA, as well as multi-billion dollars of arms sales to the Arab neighbors of Iran, also reassured Tehran; even though for just eighteen months. President Obama mentioned in the same remarks that

We welcome an Iran that plays a responsible role in the region -- one that takes concrete, practical steps to build trust and resolve its differences with its neighbors by peaceful means, and abides by international rules and norms... ending the tensions in the region and resolving its devastating conflicts will require a broader dialogue -- one that includes Iran and its GCC neighbors... a key purpose of bolstering the capacity of our GCC

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<sup>357</sup> Sohrabi, “Interview”

<sup>358</sup> Remarks by President Barack Obama, May 14, 2015

partners is to ensure that our partners can deal with Iran politically, diplomatically, from a position of confidence and strength.<sup>359</sup>

President Obama's strategic maneuvering to please the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, while at the same time aiming at reaching a comprehensive agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue, illustrate the strategic calculations of the United States which could have been perceived as changing the status quo of the region. While President Obama succeeded at taming some of the more urgent tensions and attempted at decreasing tensions in the Persian Gulf, his successor reintroduced the 2003 regime change and military confrontation policies of President Bush. Furthermore, President Obama's statement was hardly what the GCC leaders expected, as he once again illustrated his desire for cooperation between the Islamic Republic and the GCC countries. The sticking point to accepting such a position was that the United States and the GCC agreed to develop a shared ballistic missile defense (BMD) program. Through military reassurances, the United States managed to convince all GCC countries, most importantly Saudi Arabia, to welcome the JCPOA.

Since the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, the geopolitics of the Persian once again dramatically altered. President Trump expressed his strong disdain for the JCPOA and President Obama's supposed accommodation of the Islamic Republic during the presidential election campaigns, while mentioning a reduction in American presence around the world and the Middle East in specific.<sup>360</sup> However, months into his presidency, Trump has suggested his administration's adherence to the nuclear agreement, while at the same time, he has indicated the new US policy in the Middle East will include closer cooperation with the Arab states of the

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Tim Daiss, "Trump Pledges To Rip Up Iran Deal; Israelis Say Not So Fast," *Forbes*, November 22, 2016.

Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the region to more forcefully contain and confront Iran.<sup>361</sup> In regard to the United States presence in the region, Ambassador Wahba was clear that the U.S. posture “is unlikely to change, regardless of what administration is in power,” as, she argues, “the free flow of energy from the region is of strategic importance to the United States. I do not think the U.S. will be reducing that presence, if anything I think it would be even more robust.”<sup>362</sup> Elucidating that while President Obama attempted at changing the status quo in the Persian Gulf specifically, the interests of the United States in the region is unlikely to change. Thus, the Trump Administration’s more hawkish stance towards Iran, and a more amicable relationship with the GCC countries in contrast, is not far from the United States posture in the past many decades. Viewing the United States with a leader-centric approach better explains the ways in which the change in leadership has the potential of altering national policies, while the core aspects remain mostly unchanged.

Ambassador Wahba points out that while there was a rise in U.S. involvement in the region when it was actively engaged in Iraq in the first decade of the war since 2003, there has not been a significant change in U.S. presence before and after the invasion of Iraq. She argues that “if you monitor the naval presence in the Gulf at one time, it is similar; there are ships leaving and coming in and there are aircraft carriers and so on, so I will be surprised if our presence in the Gulf changes.”<sup>363</sup> In regard to the Islamic Republic, Wahba further added that “the U.S. posture has been saying to Iran in many ways that it needs to reduce its activities that are destabilizing the region and the U.S. is not leaving, specially now with the situation in

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<sup>361</sup> Farah Najar, “100 days in: Is the Middle East Trump’s new playground?” *Al Jazeera*, April 29, 2017.

<sup>362</sup> Wahba, “Interview”

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.



Yemen and what is going on in Syria and Iraq.”<sup>364</sup> The Trump Administration’s plans to fight Daesh in Syria and Iraq, and a more forceful involvement in Yemen to combat Al Qaeda, as well as assist Saudi Arabia and the UAE to repress the Houthis, are indicators of the persistence and even augmentation of U.S. presence in the region.

The GCC countries are facing a stark choice that will have profound reverberations in the region and beyond. The continuation of the cooperation with the United States, and possibly Israel, to contain and counter Iran, will dash the chances for a comprehensive rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and the GCC countries.

#### The U.S. – Israeli Proposal for Cooperation

On February 15, 2017 President Trump met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House for the first official interaction between the two allies. During a press conference, both leaders hinted at an approaching Arab-Israeli cooperation, an idea that was silently waiting to surface for years, if not decades.<sup>365</sup> While the official objective of the new coalition is for reaching an enduring peace agreement between Palestine and Israel, the unofficial, and more pressing goal to present a unified front against the Islamic Republic. Their proposal encompasses almost all of the Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as Egypt, Jordan, and possibly Lebanon and Tunisia. As Netanyahu stated: “for the first time in my lifetime, and for the first time in the life

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Joint Press Conference by President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, *Washington, United States*, February 15, 2017

of my country, Arab countries in the region do not see Israel as an enemy, but, increasingly, as an ally.”<sup>366</sup>

Furthermore, while there has been no official confirmation of backchannel talks between Israel and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states, Trump and Netanyahu’s statements indicate that previous reports alleging secret direct interactions between high-level Israeli and GCC officials have indeed taken place in the past six years – if not longer.<sup>367</sup> Israel has long seen Iran as its major adversary because of latter’s support for Hamas and Hezbollah, and its ballistic missile program and nuclear technological advances. Similarly, Saudi Arabia along with its GCC partners has grown intolerant of Iran’s perceived links to the uprisings in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, as well as Iran’s support for Bashar Al Assad in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Hezbollah in Lebanon. The shared concerns over the Islamic Republic’s regional actions, goals, and policies, has, unfortunately, allowed the establishment of back-channel collaborations that have the potential of becoming an official cooperative relationship during the Trump Administration. Perhaps the perception that an increasingly emboldened Iran is exerting power across the Middle East after the nuclear agreement has revived long-standing hostilities between Iran and the GCC, and has presented an opening for cooperation between Arabs and Israelis against a common enemy.<sup>368</sup>

At the 2017 Munich Security Conference, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman quoted (without attribution) United States Defense Secretary James Mattis, that “in the Middle East we are facing three challenges: Iran, Iran, and Iran... and I can only repeat and confirm this

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Mehran Haghiriian, “Arab States of the Persian Gulf Must Choose Between Paths Proposed by Iran and Israel,” *Atlantic Council*, February 22, 2017.

<sup>368</sup> Haghiriian, “Choose Between Paths”

approach.”<sup>369</sup> He also reaffirmed continued Israeli efforts to hinder the Islamic Republic’s reintegration into the international community post-JCPOA. In a similar vein, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair also reaffirmed his country’s objections to Iranian actions across the region soon after the Israeli statement. “The Iranians do not believe in the principle of good neighborliness or non-interference in the affairs of others,” Al Jubair stated at the Munich Conference, and further arguing that “this is manifested in their interference in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.”<sup>370</sup>

The future of Palestine is an issue that not only unites Iran and the Arab states, but all of the Muslim world. The prospects for implementing the U.S.-Israeli proposal to solve the Palestinian issue by way of isolating Iran is unclear and most likely not viable. Iran is clearly among the few Muslim countries that officially champions the rights of the Palestinians and the established relations between the Islamic Republic and Hamas adds to Iran’s continued opposition to the Israeli government. In addition, if the United States goes forward with plans to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, or gives a carte blanche for further settlements in the West Bank, while abandoning the goal of a two-state solution, it can be presumed that the Islamic Republic will further expand its involvement in Palestine and hinder the U.S.-Arab-Israeli efforts at achieving peace. This is one reason why, Ambassador Wahba argued, it is highly unlikely that the United States will abandon the two-state solution, “because when you think about the so called one state solution, the Israelis will never accept a one state solution where the Palestinians and the West Bank of Palestine brought into Israel proper and its one nation.” Additionally, she argued, “that they will not have a capital in Jerusalem, that will

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<sup>369</sup> Remarks by Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman at the Munich Security Conference. *Munich, Germany*. February 19, 2017

<sup>370</sup> Remarks by Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair at the Munich Security Conference. *Munich, Germany*. February 19, 2017

just not be acceptable to any Arab country.”<sup>371</sup> Iran on the other hand, has the ultimate goal to liberate Palestine and establish its capital in Qods (Jerusalem), which is automatically at odds with the Trump Administration’s rhetoric and the Israeli government’s actions.

The U.S.-Israeli proposal might lead to a wider peace agreement between Arab states and Israel, however, it will most definitely exacerbate contentions with Iran and increase the chances of a wider military conflict with the Islamic Republic.<sup>372</sup> Furthermore, there has been no substantial conflict between the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and Israel in more than a decade, and while a wider Arab-Israeli peace would undoubtedly have a positive impact in the region, it is contingent on a Palestinian-Israeli agreement.<sup>373</sup> Meanwhile, the rise in contention between some GCC states and Iran in the past years has arguably had more dire consequences for the region than the absence of Israeli-Arab peace.<sup>374</sup> It seems like this realization should halt the advancement of the U.S.-Israeli proposal, however the current climate of the region and the conflicts in Syria and Yemen will keep this option open for the GCC countries.

Despite their grievances towards the Israeli government, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman have gradually increased official economic relations with Israel since 1996. In November 2015, for example, it was announced that the UAE, as the host country, will allow Israel to open a mission in Abu Dhabi as a member of the newly established International Renewable Energy Agency.<sup>375</sup> Much scrutiny within the UAE, and from the Muslim world, followed this decision. Tamir Pardo, the former chief of Mossad repeated Netanyahu’s statement, while realizing the limits of

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<sup>371</sup> Wahba, “Interview”

<sup>372</sup> Haghirian, “Choose Between Paths”

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Daniel Wagner and Giorgio Cafiero, “What Does Israel Want With the UAE?” *The National Interest*, January 5, 2016.

the U.S.-Israeli proposal; he stated, “for the first time a situation has been created in which there is a rare and perhaps one-time intersection of interests between Israel and the moderate [Arab] states,” however, he added that “covert relations under the radar are fleeting,” as “the key to integrating into the region lies in economic ties and freedom of movement between countries and companies, none of which will happen unless the Palestinian issue is solved.”<sup>376</sup> His statement illustrates the apprehension that these illusionary NATO-like security arrangements with the Arab countries will not be achievable until the Palestinian issue is resolved. When an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is achieved, it will have mountainous positive reverberations in the entire regional order, however, an Arab-Israeli détente will not automatically have the same results. Until that day, the majority of the Muslim world will not have the domestic support for an official security arrangement with Israel, nor will they be able to increase bilateral and multilateral relations more than the unofficial interactions of today.

Additionally, while the leaders and governments of some Muslim countries are able to engage with their Israelis counterparts, the domestic public opinion towards the Zionist government of Israel continues to be overwhelmingly unfavorable in those countries. As Al Maeena argues, “any true Muslim or Arab, and even Christian Arabs, are not going to work with the terrorist Israelis. In my view the Jews are not my enemy, my enemy is that person who occupies, beats, and kills, and this distinction is important.”<sup>377</sup> This distinction has also been declared by the Iranian leadership, as Iran is home to the second largest Jewish community in the Middle East after Israel. Imam Khomeini stated that “the Jewish community is not the same as the Zionists. We are against the Zionists, because they are against all religions, they are not real

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<sup>376</sup> “Former Mossad Chief: Israel Acting As If Arabs Will One Day Disappear.” *The Jerusalem Post*. March 21, 2017.

<sup>377</sup> Al Maeena, “Interview”

Jews.”<sup>378</sup> Based on such existing sentiments and until the occupation of Palestine continues, Iran will maintain its position as a staunch defender of the resistance movement, and particularly its support for Hamas and Hezbollah. In reality, it is Iran’s anti-Zionist position that has conserved some sort of positive public opinion across the Muslim world.

Even though Iran and the GCC countries support different groups within Palestine, the overall objective for an independent Palestinian state is shared among all Muslim countries. One must not forget that the Al Aqsa Mosque was the first *Qibla* of Muslims, before Mecca, and the significance of Qods (Jerusalem) to the Muslim world. As Ayatollah Khamenei reiterated during his remarks at the sixth International Conference on the Palestinian Intifada in Tehran on February 21, 2017, “despite the differences that exist among Islamic countries – some of these differences are natural, some originate from the enemy’s plot, and the rest are because of negligence – the issue of Palestine can and should be the pivot of unity for all Islamic countries.”<sup>379</sup> Thus, the Palestinian issue can be a topic for dialogue between Iran and the GCC countries with an objective to present a unified front on the Palestinian cause to inhibit the deterioration of the situation in Palestine, as well as hinder the revitalized U.S.-Israeli efforts to further weaken the Palestinians in the negotiations.

### Conclusion: Options Other Than Cooperation

Iran and the GCC have three possible pathways for future relations: 1. To adapt a cooperative approach, which this thesis proposes; 2. To maintain the current level of mostly indirect tensions and minimal levels of engagement; similar to what currently exists; or 3.

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<sup>378</sup> Interview with Imam Ruhullah Khomeini. *Oriana Fallaci*. September 12, 1979

<sup>379</sup> Remarks by Ayatollah Khamenei at the Sixth International Conference on Palestinian Intifada. *Tehran, Iran*. February 21, 2017

Escalate the tensions to a perpetual conflict, that can be realized if the GCC countries work in tandem with the United States and Israel to isolate Iran. Aside from the cooperative approach which is the only option that ensures long term peace and stability in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East, the two other pathways guarantee the prolongation of the current tensions and possibly lead to a perpetual conflict. The second option is an extension of the current conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia over regional issues, dispute with the UAE over the three islands, tensions with Bahrain, and the continuation of resentments within the Iranian and the GCC populations.

While the second option has proven to be costly for both sides, the past three decades have illustrated that mutual bilateral and multilateral interests have inhibited an intensified conflict. However, the third pathway, as detailed in the previous section, is a dangerous option that threatens the stability of the region. If the GCC joins the Trump Administration's aspired trilateral U.S.-Israel-GCC alliance, for example, any hope for constructive cooperation between Iran and the GCC will cease to exist. Furthermore, the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia, can escalate the tensions by other means, including augmented military cooperation in the Persian Gulf with the United States, the installation of a joint ballistic missile program, the efforts to isolate the Islamic Republic and prevent its rapprochement with the international community.

Both of the two non-cooperative pathways will ultimately lead to zero-sum outcomes that impair all sides financially and politically. The next chapter provides a pathway with three phases that has the potential to gradually resolve the conflicts between Iran and the GCC by rectifying past grievances, addressing concerns, strengthening bilateral economic relations and increasing people-to-people exchanges. Through mediation, negotiation, and constructive dialogue for sustainable cooperation, the pathway ensures a mutually beneficial future that

advances shared interests. More importantly, the first option not only gradually resolves the disputes, it also deters the escalation of conflict; leading to a win-win outcome for Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



## CHAPTER 4

### PATHWAY FOR CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

The culmination of this thesis rests in this chapter, where a pathway for future dialogue and cooperation is presented based on the factors analyzed in the previous sections. With the goal of identifying opportunities for the betterment of relations, the three phases of mediation, negotiation, and constructive dialogue, are elements of conflict resolution that when implemented in sequence will increase the probability of success for the process. The mediation phase will include GCC member states as mediators in bilateral conflicts between Iran and other GCC countries, and provide the necessary environment for a private tête-à-tête between leaders in dispute. This process will allow the framing of the agenda for bilateral and multilateral discussions and will ensure the grievances are broached from all sides. Diplomatic and official visits may be feasible once a political will to engage is expressed by both Iran and GCC countries.

The current tensions between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf are not primordial nor perpetual. Since Iran's revolution in 1979, Iran has had differing relationships with its southern littoral neighbors, and mutual interests have mostly inhibited an escalated conflict. In almost four decades, while multiple events have caused tensions and diplomatic altercations, almost all were settled through mediation by stakeholder nations, the allure of financial profit and furtherance of mutual interests. Nevertheless, multiple underlying grievances from both sides have taken root in policy making and regional posturing. The existence of mutual interests as well as the past grievances are factors that are considered in conflict resolution, according to Morton Deutsche, and provide the basic required input for dialogue and negotiations.

Principles of good neighborliness in international relations are first analyzed to incorporate international norms and obligation during the discussions pertaining to the proposed forum for cooperation, and establish a solid framework based on such principles accepted by Iran and the GCC countries. This leads to the mediation process, where regional players, such as Oman and Kuwait, are essential to bringing other GCC partners and Iran at the same table. This prepares the foundation required for the subsequent negotiation phase where an official eight party summit is organized in Muscat or Kuwait City, to make official a working relationship between the neighboring countries. While all past grievances will not have been resolved by the start of this phase, a series of bilateral and multilateral negotiations will facilitate the disputing countries to move past the prolonged contentions. As Iran's negotiations with the P5+1 illustrated, the process will be rather excruciating and will entail serious costs for the negotiating parties. However, with sufficient progress through serious engagement, the negotiations have the potential to alter the status quo in favor of a more cooperative relationship between Iran and the GCC countries.

The negotiation phase will be extensive and might at times seem endless; however, all sides must take advantage of this process to advance their respective national interests which is undoubtedly tied to the peace and stability of the Persian Gulf. Aside from attempting to resolve past grievances through bilateral negotiations, all sides must discuss three areas of mutual concern following the establishing of a security and cooperation forum: Security and stability of the Persian Gulf, combatting violent extremism, discussions on regional conflicts and collaboration on humanitarian assistance, and aiming for a WMD free zone in the Middle East. Discussion on these three domains is essential to the interests of all eight countries, as well as a fundamental step toward peace and prosperity in the region. Following the successful

accomplishment and conclusion of this phase, the newly established forum will have achieved the prerequisites to establishing an official seven-party organization, with Iraq as an observer, which has the capacity to resolve disputes as well as advance mutual interests through constructive dialogue.

The third and final phase will start after the successful end of the negotiation process to allow sustainable cooperation through constructive dialogue. In order to have an enduring organization, this phase will establish four overarching spheres for cooperation: economic, energy, environment, and social Exchanges. Each of these aspects must become separate committees within the broader organization. This constructive dialogue phase aims to strengthen the newfound understanding between neighbors as well as to affix the cooperation areas discussed during the negotiations. These three phases, grounded in conflict resolution, present a viable pathway for cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, one that addresses the bilateral and multilateral grievances and concerns, as well as advance shared values and mutual interests.

### Conflict Resolution

To overcome the current tensions between Iran and the GCC that have spiraled across the region and beyond, all sides must recognize the importance of ending the disputes, rectifying the grievances, fortifying bilateral relations, and aiming for a constructive multilateral forum. While hopes for resolving past disputes have decreased since the new round of contentions since January 2016, not resolving the conflicts will continue to have enormous political and economic costs for all sides. One pathway to conflict resolution allows Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to incorporate and implement a process that includes mediation, negotiation, and constructive dialogue. While acknowledging that past efforts for a multilateral forum for

dialogue and cooperation have mostly failed, this final chapter utilizes conflict resolution theory to understand ways in which the innate and constructed discontent can be transformed into constructive cooperation by strengthening bilateral relations and advancing mutual interests.

Morton Deutsche, a prominent conflict resolution theorist whose theory best pertains to this chapter, argues that conflict resolution has two basic theoretical bases: first relates to the type of interdependence among goals of the parties involved in a given conflict, and the other pertains to the type of action that the parties involved take.<sup>380</sup> These ideas each have two dichotomous orientations. The first idea refers to the link between goals and how the probability of goal attainment by one disputant is positively or negatively correlated with the probability of goal attainment by the others.<sup>381</sup> The positive goal attainment correlation leads to a cooperative approach that benefits both sides, whereas the negative correlation results in a win-lose or zero-sum situation.

While both cooperation and competition are often present in conflict, Deutsche acknowledges this limitation and argues in such mixed situations, “the relative strengths of the two types of goal interdependency, as well as their general orientation to one another, largely determine the nature of the conflict process.”<sup>382</sup> Neighboring countries are rarely independent from each other, and in the case of Iran and the GCC, it is because of the interdependence that conflict has emerged. As Deutsche reasons, “the existence of conflict implies some form of interdependence.”<sup>383</sup> In the context of this thesis, the conflict between Iran and some GCC

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<sup>380</sup> Morton Deutsch, “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict,” in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, ed. Peter Coleman et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014)

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

countries, nominally Saudi Arabia, has taken a negative goal interdependence, and the win-lose approach has led to zero-sum outcomes for all sides.

The periodic victories and rewards are minimal compared to the negative costs of the tensions between Iran and the GCC countries, as well as the conflicts where they are involved on opposing sides. The decision to act on a win-lose outcome might be appealing if one is confident that they will be on the winning side. However, as noted, often conflicts with such an approach, especially the conflict between Iran and some member states of the GCC, has led to zero-sum outcomes, precisely because both sides have attempted to supersede the other in a costly rivalry throughout the region. It is for this reason that this chapter attempts to identify feasible and applicable pathways to replace the zero-sum approach with a win-win outcome for a constructive relationship between Iran and the Arab states.

If the conflict between Iran and the GCC is viewed as a mutual problem that needs to be resolved cooperatively, rather than competitively, the basic requirement for engaging in negotiations and constructive dialogue are achieved. Deutsche suggests that the theory “equates a constructive process of conflict resolution with an effective cooperative problem-solving process in which the conflict is the mutual problem to be resolved cooperatively; even if the goals of the conflicting parties are initially seen to be negatively interdependent.”<sup>384</sup> The cooperative orientation, as Deutsche argues, “enormously facilitates constructive resolution”<sup>385</sup> while the competitive orientation hinders it. Tools of conflict resolution, including mediation and negotiations, are essential to allow Iran and the GCC countries to move away from the competitive approach, and view the conflict as a mutual problem.

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

The objective of conflict resolution is to achieve a solution that is accepted and deemed just by both sides. There are two main reasons why actors may not want to engage in constructive dialogue: the belief that the negotiations will be futile, or the position of dominance and the unwillingness to change the status quo.<sup>386</sup> Previous attempts at dialogue between Iran and the GCC countries failed because the negotiations were ineffectual, and the engagement of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf was discouraged by a challenge to the status quo resulting from the JCPOA and the end of Iran's isolation. However, reasons like these do not automatically result in a never-ending conflict. Once the reasons for the lack of engagement are identified, efforts by all sides can allow the start of constructive negotiations.

Johnson and Johnson introduce the idea of *Constructive Controversy*, defining it as existing when “one person's ideas, information, conclusion, theories, and opinions are incompatible with of another and the two seek to reach an agreement.”<sup>387</sup> Constructive controversies involve what Aristotle called “*deliberate discourse* aimed at synthesizing novel solutions,”<sup>388</sup> and resolving disputes.<sup>389</sup> Furthermore, constructive controversy, according to Deutsche, is a process for “constructively coping with the inevitable difference” that parties bring to cooperative interactions, because it views “difference in understanding, perspective, knowledge, and worldview as valued resources,” and not points of contention.<sup>390</sup> Currently, Iran and some of the GCC countries are not engaged in deliberate discourse and have resorted to competitive blame-games. However, such discourse exists within smaller circles of stakeholders.

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> David Johnson et al., “Constructive Controversy: The Value of Intellectual Opposition,” in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, ed. Peter Coleman et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014)

<sup>388</sup> The discoid of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Deutsch, “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict”

The mediation and discussions between Iran and some GCC countries are in essence a deliberate discourse aimed at realizing shared interest as well as bilateral and multilateral engagements aiming for constructive cooperation.

Deutsche argues that there are three reasons why actors may not cooperate, namely autistic hostility, self-fulfilling prophecies, and unwitting commitments. Autistic hostility “involves breaking off contact and communication with the other,” resulting in prolonged hostility, primarily because “one has no opportunity to learn that it may be based on misunderstandings or misjudgments or to learn if the other has changed for the better.”<sup>391</sup> The change in behavior by Iran is an oft-repeated precondition by some GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. However, the cutting of diplomatic and economic relations with the Islamic Republic, has prolonged the conflict and diminished chances for a *détente*, as both sides cannot discuss their grievances directly.

The notion of ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ that Deutsche puts forward, where one engages in “hostile behavior toward another because of false assumption that the other has done or is preparing to do something harmful,” also applies in this situation.<sup>392</sup> This results in a kind of *folie à deux* where the self-fulfilling prophecies of both sides reinforce the other’s, by way of being blind on how their actions are negatively perceived by others.<sup>393</sup> Furthermore, unwitting commitments, refers to the parties who commit to “negative attitudes and perceptions, beliefs, defenses against the other’s expected attacks, and investments involved in carrying out their conflictual activities.”<sup>394</sup> Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have adopted policies with

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> The presence of the same or similar delusional ideas in two persons closely associated with one another

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

respect to the other that are in essence following these three notions that impede cooperation. To remove these barriers to cooperation, these three kinds of attitudes and behaviors need to be altered. To overcome these barriers and shift towards a cooperative course of action, Deutsche proposes possible solutions, and some that pertain to the conflict between Iran and the GCC countries include: exerting effective communication, expressing the need for trust building measures, willingness to enhance the other's power, and defining conflicting interests as a mutual problem to be solved by collaborative efforts.<sup>395</sup>

The conflict resolution measures proposed by Deutsche, and other scholars of conflict resolution and diplomacy, including Qi, and Zartman, can be implemented by readily available tools of international affairs. Mediation, negotiation, and constructive dialogue in a multilateral setting are the principle duties of foreign ministries as well as stated obligations of international governmental organizations. The most important obstacle to utilizing these tools is the lack of political will, and the perception that they will not advance national interests. Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have either lacked the motivation or the political will to go forward with a cooperative approach at various times in the past three decades. Despite overtures by Presidents Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Rouhani, King Abdullah, Sultan Qabous, Sheikh Al Sabah, and countless other, none of the actions proposed were implemented and the overtures were short lived as new tensions supplanted the positive advances.

This chapter aims to provide a pathway for constructive cooperation based on elements of conflict resolution. As a foundational factor, a set of mutually accepted norms and principles must be identified and incorporated that can best guide and advance the conflict resolution process. The following section looks at principles of good neighborly relations and ways in

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid.



which they can be applied to resolving the disputes and taming the contentions between Iran and the Arabs states of the Persian Gulf.

### Principles of Good Neighborliness in International Relations

The importance of good neighborly relations was clearly a priority at the end of the second World War in 1945, and continues to be significant more than seventy years later. The Charter starts with “we the people of the United Nations determined” and raises the agreed upon norms by world powers and reminds the obligation to save future generations from the scourge of war, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, as well as abide by international law with the aim of promoting social progress. The second paragraph refers to good neighborliness and charges the international body “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used.”<sup>396</sup> Multiple frameworks for the principles of good neighborly relations have prevailed in international relations, however, almost all are rooted in the Charter of the United Nations and the international norms it helped establish.

The Conference of Asian and African Nations at Bandung, Indonesia, on April 24, 1955, is one example of how a group of developing and underdeveloped countries produced a ‘Declaration on the Promotion of World Peace and Cooperation.’ Section G of the communique lays out ten principles on good neighborly relations, referred to as *Dasa Sila*.<sup>397</sup>

1. Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations;

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<sup>396</sup> Charter of the United Nations (1945)

<sup>397</sup> Sompong Sucharitkul “The Principle of Good-Neighborliness in International Law,” *Golden Gate University School of Law*, April 27, 1996: 11

2. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations
3. Recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations large and small
4. Abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country
5. Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations
6. (a) Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defense to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers  
(b) Abstention by any country from exerting pressures on another country
7. Refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any countries
8. Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations
9. Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation
10. Respect for justice and international obligations

As most of the countries involved in producing the Bandung Communique were either colonies or not recognized by the United Nations in 1955, the anti-hegemonic aspiration of these countries are evident. The Dasa Sila pays tribute to the UN Charter while expanding the obligations of states, notably points five and six, which refer to the individual and collective defense of countries by way of counteracting foreign and large powers' interests. While colonialism is over, foreign hegemony is alive in the Persian Gulf, and U.S. interference and influence in the region is the root cause of the tense relations between Iran and the Arab states. Due to the primary fact that collective defenses in the region serve the interests of 'big powers,' as mentioned in the Dasa Sila. These internationally recognized principles have created precedents in international law and norms within international relations, and elements of these should be adaptively incorporated during the discussions between Iran and the GCC.

Similarly, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2625, titled 'Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in

accordance with the Charter of the United Nations' adopted by acclamation in 1970, insists on countries to adopt seven principles as inherent duties, some include:<sup>398</sup>

- a. The principle that States shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations
- b. The principle that States shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered
- c. The duty not to intervene in matters within the domestic jurisdiction of any State, in accordance with the Charter
- d. The duty of States to co-operate with one another in accordance with the Charter

These principles, adopted by all members of the United Nations in 1970 (excluding Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, as they were colonies of the United Kingdom at that time), show efforts towards de-colonizing and promoting stability. Aside from key reoccurring elements of all principles relating to good neighborliness, two relate most to the topic of this thesis: the principles and duties of not intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries, and the duty as member states of the United Nations to cooperate in good faith with other countries, especially neighbors. While Iran and the GCC countries categorically deny any wrong doing and view intervention in the internal affairs of other countries as endangering the regional peace and stability, both sides accuse the other of such negative actions. The legitimacy of the claims by each side are questionable as explained in previous chapters; whether it is, for example, some GCC countries alleging Iranian interference in Yemen, Bahrain, and Lebanon, or, on the other hand, Iranian allegation of Saudi led involvement in the same countries and beyond. However, if cooperation is viewed as a duty, rather than just an advancement of self-interests, both Iran and the GCC can be obliged to join hands, or at least sit across the same table. When cooperation is considered as a duty there is less uncertainty of its durability and outcomes.

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<sup>398</sup> United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2625 (1970)

In addition, the UNSC Resolution 598 that marked the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 also binds Iran, Iraq, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf countries to cooperate for security and stability of the region as a whole. The resolution requests the UN Secretary General “to examine, in consultation with Iran and Iraq and other States of the region, measures to enhance the security and stability of the region.”<sup>399</sup> While close to three decades have passed since the adoption of this resolution, no meaningful security architecture has been established in a collaborative effort by the eight countries to increase the security and stability of the region, but rather a complete disregard of the current security arrangements is further destabilizing the region through exclusionary actions. This UNSC resolution is one other international obligation which forms a basis for these mutually acceptable international norms and obligations agreed upon by Iran and the GCC countries. Thus, the inclusion of these principles in the mediation and negotiation processes will facilitate the achievement of a constructive cooperation in the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>399</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 (1987)

### Phase 1: Mediation

Mediation has been a successful method in resolving various different types of conflicts: in domestic issues such as divorce and custody settlements, in national settings such as ending civil wars, and on the international level such as peace processes. The definitions of international mediation vary, however it is commonly defined as “the intervention of a third party in the dispute of two or more parties, for the purpose of improving the nature of interaction between the disputants; in a distinct form of third party intervention,” according to Pruitt and Kressel.<sup>400</sup> In international mediation, the third-party intervention is conducted by states and other actors that are viewed positively and approved by the disputants. According to Qi, among the various methods that exist in resolving international conflicts, mediation is regarded as “the most effective.”<sup>401</sup> Qi further elaborates that international mediation is:

A way of peacefully resolving international disputes which involves a third party's direct involvement in negotiations between the parties to the dispute, with the goal of encouraging the parties to make concessions, or through the use of diplomatic channels propose a plan for resolution of the conflict which the parties might take into consideration and ultimately adopt.<sup>402</sup>

This definition applies to Oman’s role in facilitating the negotiations between Iran and the United States, as well as Kuwait’s actions on behalf of the GCC. While Oman and Kuwait are also parties to the dispute, their past actions with regard to Iran and other GCC member states have well-positioned these countries as mediators, primarily because of the various approaches within the GCC. Qi adds: “The success of the strategy as regards to mediating the conflict hinges on its ability to find a solution that accords with the interests of the two parties, in this way

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<sup>400</sup> Cynthia Cohen, “Review: Mediation Research by Kenneth Kressel; Dean G. Pruitt,” *The Academy of Management Review* 15, no. 3 (July 1990)

<sup>401</sup> Haixia Qi, “A Comparison of the Effectiveness of International Conflict Mediation Strategies,” *Chinese Journal of International politics* 4 (2007)

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

giving them an incentive to engage in negotiations.”<sup>403</sup> In the first instance, the trust building efforts by Sultan Qabous prepared the stage for rare constructive meeting between Iran and the United States. The Kuwaiti Foreign Minister, on the other hand, initiated its mediating role by suggesting a proposal for ending the conflict by acting on behalf of the GCC. The primary incentive in both cases is to advance the interests of all sides, including the mediators who will undoubtedly benefit from a rapprochement, and this realization permits the mediators to proceed further.

This recognition of mutual interests, however, hinges on the independence of the mediator and the rationality of the actors involved. Qi argues that the three parties involved in the process must be unitary actors and formulate their policies and positions independently, and that the three actors involved in the mediation process must be rational, and “consider the costs and benefits of each action they take.”<sup>404</sup> While Oman and Kuwait are members of the GCC, their formulation of policies and approaches are independent from the group, allowing them to mediate the conflict with Iran. Rationality of actors, on the other hand, is contingent on the ideological approach and political decisions of the parties involved, and as explained in previous chapters, Iran and the GCC countries are in most part rational actors that seek to advance their national interests while recognizing the costs of their actions. In this regard, Deutsche argues that interests must be carefully constructed so as to clearly state intentions and objectives.<sup>405</sup> Deutsche adds that the specific actions and changes requested must be declared, in order to take into consideration all points of dispute and aim to rectify grievances. Based on this premise, the

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Deutsch, “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict”

mediator's role is to highlight the shared values and mutual interest of the two parties, and make clear the benefits of cooperation and the potential losses of a prolonged conflict.<sup>406</sup>

### Stakeholders as Mediators

If the GCC countries had a unified front against the Islamic Republic, there would not have been any possibility for utilizing member states as mediators for a rapprochement. Iran is facing six countries that have numerous shared values and interests, much more than those between Iran and any of the Arab countries in the Middle East. However, the vast areas of bilateral and multilateral interests and the close relations between Iran and some leaders and sectors of the GCC countries, and more importantly, the understanding of the consequences of the continuation of conflict, have allowed multiple apertures for mediation. The existence of strong bilateral relationships between Iran and some GCC countries, as well as the differences in priorities and objectives, have prevented the GCC countries to present a unified front against Iran. As described in detail the differences in bilateral relation in Chapter 2, the level of historical, religious, and more importantly, economic relations in the past decades distinguishes Iran's relations with each member of the GCC. While there are some mutual concerns, such as the dispute over the islands in the Persian Gulf, Iran's relationship with the Shia's populations in some of their countries, and the conflicting positions on the wars in Syria and Yemen, the bilateral relations and the interdependency between Iran and each member of the GCC presents viable evidence for the possibility of a constructive dialogue between all parties.

Oman and to a lesser extent Kuwait, have illustrated and proven their capacity to mediate the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia as part of a greater Iran-GCC dialogue. On January

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

24, the Foreign Minister of Kuwait met with President Hassan Rouhani to deliver a letter on behalf of the GCC.<sup>407</sup> While the details of the letter have not been made public, this visit was significant as it was the first overture by the GCC to Iran following the intensification of tensions a year prior. The mediation efforts by Oman and Kuwait to solve the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as forge a wider and more constructive relationship between all sides, comes a time when the GCC countries are increasingly intrigued and inclined towards advancing their ties with the United States. However, the uncertainty of President Trump's policies towards the GCC countries as well as the lack of coherence in overall Middle East policies of the United States, has prompted the GCC countries to attempt at initiating a process to resolve the disputes with Iran.

With the Trump administration's desire to create unified front against Iran with a trilateral U.S.-Israel-GCC coalition, the step taken by Kuwait on behalf of the GCC initiated an official round of discussions on managing the conflicts and findings ways for future cooperation. Less than a month later, President Rouhani followed with state visits to Oman and Kuwait on February 15th to officially respond to the proposal, coincidentally the same day Trump and Netanyahu held talks in Washington.<sup>408</sup> While Oman had proved its capacity as a mediator to not just Iran, but the international community, during the nuclear negotiations, Kuwait's endeavor is rather new. Both countries, nevertheless, have expressed their desires for ending regional tensions, and rather than acting as buffers to manage the disputes, Oman and Kuwait have shown their seriousness to engage in assisting the resolution of the conflicts. As Sara Masry argues: "Oman and Kuwait have a very important role, because it is much different having a block of six

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<sup>407</sup> Haghirian, "Choose Between Paths"

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.



states against one state, and having a variety and different shades of positions within the GCC.”<sup>409</sup> She argues that “while when it comes to it, all will stand together as seen in the aftermath of the storming of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran, but other than those times, they have had a very important role in delivering those messages back and forth and encouraging and keeping the door open for having better relations.”<sup>410</sup>

The Foreign Ministers of the GCC met in Riyadh on March 30, 2017, to consider the report by the Kuwaiti Minister on his trip to Tehran as well as President Rouhani’s response.<sup>411</sup> Without mentioning the details of the interactions, the GCC Ministerial Council issued a statement raising previously expressed grievances in four separate points, hinting at what might have been the content of the letter and subjects of discussions. The statement included a revitalized reiteration of the UAE’s claim to the three islands, a more clear set of pre-requisite principles for the future of relations, the repetition of the oft-repeated condemnation of Iranian actions in and towards Bahrain, and also the GCC’s recognition and adherence to the JCPOA. The text of these four points in the statement are as follows:<sup>412</sup>

11. The Ministerial Council confirmed the GCC permanent positions and resolutions which were confirmed by all previous statements rejecting Iranian continued occupation of the three islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa of the United Arab Emirates. The council stressed its support of the UAE sovereign right over its three islands: Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa and the territorial water, airspace, continental shelf and exclusive economic zone of the three islands as an integral part of the territory of the United Arab Emirates. The council considered that any decisions, practices or acts carried out by Iran on the three islands are null and void as well as do not change any historical and legal facts. The council calls upon the Islamic Republic of

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<sup>409</sup> Sara Masry, *Interview by Mehran Haghirian*, March 24, 2017

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> “Foreign Minister takes part in the GCC Ministerial meeting.” *Bahrain News Agency*. March 30, 2017.

<sup>412</sup> Press Statement by the Ministerial Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States. *Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. March 30, 2017

Iran to respond to the UAE's efforts to resolve the issue through direct negotiations or go to the International Court of Justice.

12. The Ministerial Council stressed the GCC stances and resolutions regarding the GCC-Iranian relations and confirmed the necessity of fully abiding by the basic principles based on the Charter of the United Nations, the international law, the principles of good neighborliness, respecting the sovereignty of States, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes, and rejection of sectarianism.

13. The Ministerial Council expressed its condemnation of the Iranian regime's irresponsible provocative statements and acts of aggression against the Kingdom of Bahrain, calling upon the Iranian regime to stop the policies that feed sectarian conflicts.

14. The Ministerial Council confirmed the GCC stances and decisions in this regard that Iran abides by the agreement reached with the group of countries (5 + 1) in July 2015, on its nuclear program and to implement the Security Council resolution 2231 (July 2015) on the nuclear agreement.

Importantly, the GCC statement reaffirmed their collective support for the JCPOA, while condemning Iran's actions towards Bahrain, and repeating claims over the Persian Gulf islands. Furthermore, the mentioning of the principles of international law and good neighborly relations, it can be presumed that the GCC proposal for engaging Iran is built on this statement, and as such, these conditions must be incorporated in the official discussion and negotiations between Iran and the GCC countries. Ambassador Wahba lauded the interactions as a positive indication for the future of dialogue and detente in the region, arguing that:

The trip by the Kuwaiti foreign minister and the response by Rouhani is a good sign. A lot of people say it is not the talk, it is the action that counts, and I think this was a significant move. This is a move like the Sadat to Jerusalem breakthrough, somebody has to break this constant stream of blame games and accusations back and forth. The Rouhani - Kuwaiti foreign minister exchange of visits were not quite the Sadat to Jerusalem initiative but they were significant.<sup>413</sup>

### Strengthening Bilateral Relations

To strengthen the mediation phase and meet the required conditions of the negotiation process, all sides must illustrate their good-will and intentions for constructive engagement. The Islamic Republic, on its part, must increase economic and social relations with the GCC

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<sup>413</sup> Wahba, "Interview"

countries. Iran can present lucrative investment opportunities to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf by way of showcasing trade exhibitions in the GCC capitals, ministerial interactions, and official diplomatic visits. Furthermore, track two diplomatic collaborations can lead to, for example, publicized student exchanges, arrangement of soccer matches, and ingenious ideas by the people of the region. These are among the many possible examples for enhancing relations during the mediation phase.

Oman and Kuwait, and to a lesser extent UAE and Qatar, have benefited from the investments in Iran and the forging of high-value joint ventures, especially following the removal of international sanctions as a result of the JCPOA. However, because of the January 2016 events, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain severed economic and commercial ties, which inhibited these two countries from taking advantage of the post-JCPOA economic opportunities in Iran. To allow the advancement and successful completion of the mediation phase, the stakeholder mediators must facilitate the reinstatement of diplomatic and economic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. As Bahrain's decision was bound to that of Saudi Arabia's, the betterment of relations between Tehran and Riyadh is of utmost importance. In this regard, the agreement for the return of Iranian pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the 2017 Hajj is a sign of possible restoration in other areas. The momentum created by this agreement has the potential to lead to further tangible outcomes, and the reopening of the embassies prior to the start of Hajj on August 30th will be an indication for moving forward to the negotiation phase, en route to a more cooperative future.

Diplomatic visits to the UAE and Qatar by Iran's president is necessary. The official visits will illustrate Iran's seriousness to engage all GCC members, as well as further increase the ties Foreign Minister Zarif established during his trips to Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha. Due to

the existence of a great number of Iranians in Dubai, it is fitting for the Iranian President to pay a visit to the UAE in the summer of 2017 on the first leg of his Persian Gulf trip before heading to Qatar. Enhancing relations with the Abu Dhabi Sheikdom is an important step, as the UAE's grievances are mostly expressed by the capital which has very close ties with the Saudi Arabian monarchy. President Rouhani's trip, accompanied by multiple bilateral joint ventures and investment agreements, will positively boost relations. The trip will allow a setting for official bilateral discussion on the dispute over the three islands which can be followed by series of solemn negotiations between the two countries.

In addition, the establishment of social interactions can potentially enhance relations, as the current levels of people-to-people exchanges are minimal, if not nonexistent, which have further diverged Iranian and Arab from one another. While there is a high number of Iranian tourists traveling to Dubai, there are few who travel to other countries in the GCC. On the other hand, there is a minimal number of Arab tourists traveling to Iran, aside from Shi'a pilgrims visiting Mashhad or Qom. Promoting vacation destinations in Iran and cities across the GCC is essential to increase understanding between peoples. Soccer matches, a mutually adored sport event, is the most reoccurring contact between Iran and the GCC countries. The creation of a soccer league that comprises the seven countries along with possibly Yemen and Iraq will establish a more constant interaction between the teams of the countries as well as their fans. Furthermore, student exchanges and other forms of creative measures developed by the people of these countries will enable more interactions that could also advance educational, scientific, or economic interests of individuals and their countries.

### Increase Involvement and Collaboration Within the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation

Iran, the GCC countries, and the fifty other Muslim countries are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the second largest international body which was established in 1969. This organization has multiple committees and organs which operate under a framework similar to the United Nations. Utilizing the existing platforms within the OIC will allow a formal setting for cooperation between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation and the Islamic Center for the Development of Trade, for example, aim to promote trade exchanges among members by “Organizing trade fairs and specialized exhibitions and other trade activities to contribute to the promotion of the Member States products, and encouraging contacts among businessmen of the Member States and bringing them together.”<sup>414</sup> This center can provide the foundation for increased economic interactions between Iran and the GCC countries and facilitate the arrangement of such exhibitions and business interactions.

The Standing Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation and The Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, are two other organs of the OIC which can foster people-to-people exchanges between the Iranians and Arabs. With the goal to “strengthen, promote and consolidate cooperation among the Member States and consolidate it in the fields of education, science, culture and communication,” this committee is responsible for preparing proposals and organizing programs capable of improving the capacity of members to cooperate.<sup>415</sup> Such official platforms able to produce tangible outcomes should be considered by

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<sup>414</sup> *Objectives of the Islamic Center for the Development of Trade*, The Website of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation.

<sup>415</sup> *Objectives of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, The Website of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation.

Iran, the GCC countries, and more importantly the mediators who aim at reducing the differences and rectifying grievances between disputing parties through cooperation.

As an example of youth and student-led initiatives, the Youth Forum of the Islamic Conference on Dialogue and Cooperation utilized the ‘All Different - All Equal’ framework of the Council of Europe to find ways for religious and cultural interchange. During its third year, on March 31, 2007 the participants in the Forum produced the Istanbul Youth Declaration that recommends a series of actions to be implemented by the governments of the member states, starting with “Governments and other decision makers should introduce intercultural and inter-religious education and dialogue in educational institutions in order to foster more tolerant, understanding and participative values in society, creating an adjustment to multicultural environments.”<sup>416</sup> The existence of such an institution led by the youth who have the capacity to present recommendations to governments is a significant achievement.

Shiraz, one of the cultural centers of Iran, hosted a two-day ceremony in January 2017 as the city was named the OIC Youth Capital for the year.<sup>417</sup> This opportunity allows Iran to engage youth from across the Muslim world to enhance their understanding of the Islamic Republic and at the same time promote cooperation in the fields of science, technology, entrepreneurship, and research. The mediators, specifically Oman and Kuwait, can take advantage of the established settings by the OIC to encourage and present the identified opportunities for cooperation in the various fields to Iran and other GCC countries.

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<sup>416</sup> Istanbul Youth Declaration, Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation, March 31, 2007

<sup>417</sup> “Shiraz, OIC Youth Capital,” *Financial Tribune*, February 7, 2017.

## Phase 2: Negotiations

The primary purpose of the mediation phase is to prepare the foundations for earnest and determined negotiations over bilateral disputes and multilateral concerns. The negotiations phase will require serious engagement and the political will of all sides, and will consist of negotiations over the various bilateral and multilateral issues between Iran and the GCC countries. The mediators can facilitate the acceptance of constructive dialogue as a means to deter the escalation of conflict, and at the same time defuse the pressures from the United States and others for opposing arrangements. With the successful start and institutionalization of the previous phase, the mediators can focus on laying the ground work for bilateral negotiations over disputes between Iran and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and prepare the required setting for the establishment of a regional organization to foster cooperation between Iran and all members of the GCC. Ultimately, the negotiation phase aims to start a process that resolves the bilateral disputes, as well as proposes important domains of mutual interest for constructive collaboration.

The security challenges of the Middle East have been constantly evolving since the start of the twenty-first century, and a new security structure is needed that encompasses the seven littoral neighbors with the inclusion of Iraq in later stages. Iraq, as a neighbor, and as a Muslim country, must be included in the organization. Iraq's exclusion will ensure conflict and hostility in the region and beyond, and will be a continuation of the GCC's core objective of excluding Iraq and Iran since its inception. Furthermore, the exclusion of Iraq will further exacerbate sectarianism, and its inclusion will further ensure constructive cooperation between all littoral countries of the Persian Gulf.

Negotiation, as Keohane defines, requires the actors to “adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination.”<sup>418</sup> The optimal environment in which this type of policy coordination can be achieved is through negotiations where all parties have the required political will to engage and the actors are prepared to offer *concessions* in exchange for *compensations*.<sup>419</sup> This exchange process is the foundational attribute of negotiations, and as Zartman asserts, this phase will not achieve substantial progress until a mutually acceptable solution is agreed upon by “all parties involved,” ensuring the satisfaction and positive goal attainment of all actors.<sup>420</sup> Furthermore, Keohane argues that “no nation will concede political advantages to another nation without the expectation, which may or may not be well-founded, of receiving proportionate advantages in return.”<sup>421</sup> In other words, Iran and the GCC have legitimate concerns and grievances and all sides expect a change in behavior from the other. However, while the compensations have been identified by all sides, none have indicated or provided any concessions to the others. This is largely due to the lack of direct dialogue and negotiations.

The Islamic Republic Iran and the majority of the GCC countries have adopted negative substitutability where all sides are actively counteracting the other’s efforts, not only in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, but across the globe through determined exercise of soft power and vigorous public diplomacy efforts. Deutsche underlines the importance of the concept of substitutability as among the vital elements in understanding the social and psychological

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<sup>418</sup> Helen Milner, “International Theories of Cooperation Among Nations,” *World Politics* 44, no. 3 (April 1992): 467

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid*, 471.

<sup>420</sup> William Zartman, “What I Want to Know about Negotiations,” *International Negotiation* 7 (2002): 7

<sup>421</sup> Milner, “Cooperation Among Nations,” 471



processes that influence the “major effects of cooperation and competition” during negotiations.<sup>422</sup> Substitutability is defined as how actions by one party can satisfy another party’s intentions, or as Deutsche argues, “substitutability permits you to accept the activities of others in fulfilling your needs,” where negative substitutability refers to “active rejection and effort to counteract the effects of another’s activities,” which leads to heavy investment in inhibiting the other’s progress.<sup>423</sup> Through negotiations, however, this view on negative substitutability can positively shift and arrive at win-win outcomes and overcome the failed accomplishment of objectives.

Negotiations are produced when “the persistence of unilateral efforts is seen to lead only to hardening blockage and rising cost.”<sup>424</sup> Parties involved in the negotiations must “perceive a possibility of obtaining a bilateral or multilateral solution to their problem or conflict that is preferable to that obtained unilaterally.”<sup>425</sup> Additionally, based on Pruitt’s argument, Iran and the GCC must engage in integrative negotiation, where all sides attempt to settle disputes “in a way the maximizes both of their respective interests;” in other words, settle on a win-win outcome.<sup>426</sup> In the past all sides have attempted at unilaterally resolving the issues, which have resulted in minimal gains, if not further damages to the relations. The realization that past actions have failed to culminate into a substantial solution is a strong reason to engage in negotiations.

One of the main reasons for creating an inclusive regional security architecture is the realization that exclusionary policies and open conflict has detrimental effects throughout the

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<sup>422</sup> Deutsch, “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict”

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Zartman, “Negotiations,” 7

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Roy Lewicki and Edward Tormlinson “Negotiation” in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, ed. Peter Coleman et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014)

region and the world. To reach a sustainable security arrangement in the Persian Gulf, basic principles must be accepted by all participating states. These principles must be based on international norms and principles of good neighborly relations, as well as the attention to shared Islamic values. They should include respecting the sovereignty of all countries and their territorial integrity, refraining from intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, accepting the measures for peaceful settlement of disputes, and preventing the threat or use of force. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that any threat to one country in the Persian Gulf is a threat to all, and that there cannot be security at the expense of insecurity of others. A new joint collaborative strategy is required that primarily initiates a process of resolving bilateral disputes as well as serves as a multilateral forum that incorporates the following measures of mutual concern. Arguably a new forum for cooperation, based on principles agreed upon by all regional players, addresses the mutual concerns of parties involved while ensuring long-term peace, security, and stability in the Persian Gulf and the broader region.

### Bilateral Negotiations

The negotiation phase will not be implementable without the success of the mediation phase which facilitates the foundations for serious engagement. As the mediation phase includes enhancement of bilateral relations, the Islamic Republic must engage in three primary areas of bilateral negotiations: bilateral negotiations with the UAE over the three islands, bilateral negotiations with Saudi Arabia for the resumption of diplomatic ties, and bilateral negotiations with Bahrain over religious and political differences. These three primary areas of bilateral negotiations, which have been explained in detail in Chapter 2, are required before engaging in multilateral negotiations over shared concerns. Only after achieving significant progress with tangible results in these negotiation, Iran and the GCC countries can initiate an official

rapprochement phase that establishes a security and cooperation organization to facilitate the resolution of other regional conflicts and promotes further dialogue and understanding among the people of these countries.

### Establishing A Security and Cooperation Forum

Creating a forum where the durability of disputes is recognized, while considering ways for their peaceful settlement, is an integral primary step for a cooperative security architecture in the Middle East. A regional inclusive platform for dialogue must be initiated to bring Iran and the GCC countries around the same table to discuss the core pillars concerning the implementation of this new security architecture. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), provides a particularly suitable framework for Iran and the GCC countries. Wehrey and Sokolsky, have argued for a regional forum similar to that of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe which led to the Helsinki Final Act and the creation of the OSCE, which sought to improve relations between the East and West of Europe.<sup>427</sup> The OSCE, as Meerts argues, “is a good example of regional inclusiveness, both for issues and for countries.”<sup>428</sup> As an organization rooted in 1972 with an objective for engagement and cooperation between neighboring and regional countries, the OSCE was formed due to the need for security, stability, protection of human rights and the emergence of new democratic

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<sup>427</sup> Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky, *Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2015)

<sup>428</sup> Paul Meerts, *Diplomatic Negotiation: Essence and Evolution*, (The Hague: Clingendael, 2015)

systems.<sup>429</sup> While Iran and the GCC should only focus on the security and stability aspect, the OSCE offers a framework that also pertains to the Persian Gulf.

Ambassador Mousavian says regarding Iran's aspirations for a regional security architecture with the GCC, that "since early 1990s, Iranian officials have sought a regional cooperation and security system, similar to the OSCE, in the Persian Gulf. Such a forum will allow these states to air their concerns, build trust, and discuss security threats."<sup>430</sup> While no tangible measure has been taken by the Islamic Republic, nor the GCC, to arrive at such a forum, the establishment of an inclusive organization ensures long-term stability and cooperation between the seven countries. Progress on the bilateral front, enhances the prospects of multilateral negotiation. Following a sufficient progress and breakthrough in the diplomatic interactions initiated in the mediation phase and the start of bilateral negotiations over remaining disputes, an official summit must be organized in Muscat or Kuwait City. This summit will be a first of its kind where only the eight littoral nations of the Persian Gulf convene to multilaterally tackle mutual concerns and shared threats. Central to these negotiations through the summit are four area: Security and stability of the Persian Gulf, combating violent extremism, discussion on regional conflicts and collaboration on humanitarian assistance, aiming for a Weapons of Mass Destruction free zone in the Middle East.

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<sup>429</sup> The OSCE Website's *Who we are* section reads "The OSCE has a comprehensive approach to security that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human aspects. It therefore addresses a wide range of security-related concerns, including arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, human rights, national minorities, democratization, policing strategies, counter-terrorism and economic and environmental activities. All 57 participating States enjoy equal status, and decisions are taken by consensus on a politically, but not legally binding basis."

<sup>430</sup> Mousavian, "Interview"

## Security and Stability of the Persian Gulf

Security and stability of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman are of the greatest importance to the member states, as well as the international community. Even though this committee must expand to incorporate all necessary areas of maritime security overtime, combatting piracy and trafficking as well as the protection of off-shore oil and gas fields are the most feasible and pressing issue areas that require the multilateral collaboration of all eight countries. While there are active and inactive Memorandum of Understandings between Iran and Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE on various different aspects of maritime security, a formalized multilateral agreement can further enhance and strengthen joint efforts in these shared and international waterways.

The Persian Gulf is also the most significant source of energy for the international community. The presence of hundreds of different U.S. and European marines, battle ships, cruisers, and fleets, as well as the transportation of thousands of international cargo ships in and out of the Persian Gulf from and destined to around the world have magnified the importance of these waters globally. Whilst on numerous occasions military and political analysts of the Persian Gulf have called for an integrative approach by the GCC countries to counter and isolate Iran, the security and stability of the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Strait of Hormoz will not be ensured without a comprehensive inclusionary multilateral policy.

Collaborations on security measures will undoubtedly benefit not only the littoral states of the Persian Gulf, but also the entire international community that relies on its vast natural resources as well as the high magnitude of trade interactions that occur in these waters. Furthermore, security coordination in the fight against Daesh and other terrorist groups around the region is also an important area. As Masry argues, security coordination should be the first item on the agenda of the newly established forum, as:

The region is extremely insecure at the moment and there are states on the verge of collapse, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as other GCC countries, are very strong in their respective security services in terms of securing their borders and strong intelligence services. They could be using these in the benefit of the region if they start collaborating.<sup>431</sup>

While at the moment it might seem very far off because the interests of Iran and the GCC countries may not be aligned, Masry contends that “in an ideal world, if they were collaborating, they could be very quick to quash the militias and terrorist groups that threaten the region’s security; and as a result of the collaboration, we would not need that much outside influence from the U.S. and European countries.”<sup>432</sup> Such collaborations will lead to stronger relations between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and will have the potential to effectuate the littoral states as responsible actors for providing and ensuring the security of the region. An outcome favorable to Iran and the GCC countries.

### Combating Violent Extremism

Violent extremism has surfaced and afflicted the Middle East in various ways, including terrorism and sectarianism. The primary collective regional security challenge has become the rise of violent extremism throughout the Middle East since the start of the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, and augmented as a result of the Arab uprisings in 2011. As a result, Iran, the GCC countries, as well as the wider Muslim world are embroiled in divisive conflicts and proxy wars that have further diverged the governments and people of the region apart. Thus, the backbone of a new security architecture between Iran and the GCC countries must be collective efforts in combatting violent extremism and also defusing the sectarian and

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<sup>431</sup> Masry, “Interview”

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

identity politics stimulated by extremist elements within the governments and religious establishments.

At his first UN General Assembly in 2013, President Rouhani introduced a draft resolution on a World Against Violent Extremism (WAVE), that was approved and adopted by consensus on December 10, 2013. The General Assembly resolution A68/L.31 aims to unify the international community in the fight against terrorist organizations as well as the surge of sectarian and identity politics in the Middle East. The resolution's fourth operative paragraph reads:

*Urges* all Member States to unite against violent extremism in all its forms and manifestations as well as sectarian violence, encourages the efforts of leaders to discuss within their communities the causes of violent extremism and discrimination and evolve strategies to address these causes, and underlines that States, regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious bodies and the media have an important role to play in promoting tolerance and respect for religious and cultural diversity.<sup>433</sup>

This initiative by the Islamic Republic was well received by the UN member states. As a result of the growing threat from Daesh and other terrorist organizations in the Middle East, as well as across the international community, evident by the heinous attacks in Nice, Paris, Dhaka, Orlando, Istanbul, and countless other tragic incidents, WAVE was a significant resolution by the United Nations. However, even though the resolution was broad enough to include all member states that are keen on joining multilateral efforts to combat extremism, WAVE has yet to implement tangible collective measures. Thus, as primary stakeholders in the region, as well as victims of terrorist attacks, Iran and the GCC countries must adopt a new, inclusive, and comprehensive approach towards terrorism and sectarianism. The newly created forum's primary

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<sup>433</sup> United Nations General Assembly Resolution A68/L.31 (2013)

objective must be to rid the region of terrorism and sectarianism that have both tormented the people, the infrastructure, and future prospects of the region.

#### Discussions on Regional Conflicts and Collaboration on Humanitarian Assistance

When the scourge of terrorism and violent extremism are expunged from the region through collective efforts, new collaborative actions are required to sustain the peace and disbar the creation of other versions of extremism. Furthermore, the reconstruction efforts and the political future of the conflict-ridden countries in the Middle East are important areas for cooperation between Iran and the GCC countries. The future peace and stability in Syria and Yemen is in the interest of all countries in the region as well as the international community. The political, military, and humanitarian costs of the wars in Syria and Yemen are most conspicuous reasons for the attainment of a constructive engagement between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the GCC as a whole. Furthermore, not only must these crises be solved through collaborative efforts, the negotiations on more practical interests, discussed in previous chapters, can create opportunities on these broader geostrategic issues.

Iran, with its official support of the Syrian government, and the GCC countries, with their support of various opposition groups, are among the main stakeholders in the multi-party and multi-dimensional war in Syria. Iran, the GCC states, as well as the entire international community are obliged to abide by the December 18, 2015, UNSC Resolution 2254 which endorses the Geneva communiqué of June 30, 2012, and the Vienna Statements in 2015, as the basis for “a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria, and stresses that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria.”<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015)



Furthermore, the UNSC Resolution 2254 also reiterates the importance of humanitarian assistance, the end of violence and indiscriminate use of weapons against civilians, the fight against Daesh and Al Nusrah Front, and the support for a free and fair election within eighteen months of its implementation. As a result of the resolution, numerous rounds of negotiation have been held between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition, spearheaded by the Secretary General's Special Envoy for Syria, Steffan De Mistura. The series of negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2017, organized by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, have been organized in accordance with the UNSC Resolution 2254 and based on the same objectives. Despite opposing interests between Iran and the GCC countries, an end to the conflict in Syria is in the interest of the international community. Even though the desired future of Syria is also contested, a political peace process mediated by the United Nations between Syrians is an option unrivaled by any other proposal that all members of the UN, including Iran and the GCC countries have agreed upon.

While the political process for an end to the conflict in Syria is essential, the months and years following a permanent cease fire requires collective assistance for the Syrian people in their reconstruction endeavors. Among the 26 members of the International Syria Support Group, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Iraq, are committed to a political process and the fight against terrorism, as well as the reconstruction of the infrastructure in Syria, and the resettlement of refugees and the internally displaced. Kuwait has been among the sponsors of various humanitarian conferences for Syria, and at a Supporting Syria conference in London in 2016, the donations pledged by the international community exceeded ten billion dollars.<sup>435</sup> Such efforts are crucial for the long-term peace and stability of Syria, the region, and beyond.

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<sup>435</sup> Matthew Weaver, "Syrian donor conference: more than \$10bn raised, says Cameron – as it happened," *The Guardian*, February 4, 2016.

Collaboration on international humanitarian efforts in Syria, ought to be coupled with earnest and urgent assistance to Yemen. According to the United Nations report, the overwhelming majority of the Yemeni population is under threat from famine. In the words of the United Nations World Food Program Director in Yemen:

The situation is getting close to a breaking point in Yemen with unprecedented levels of hunger and food insecurity. Millions of people can no longer survive without urgent food assistance.... We are in a race against time to save lives and prevent a full-scale famine unfolding in the country, but we urgently need resources to do this.<sup>436</sup>

The estimated 6.8 million people on the brink of famine due to severe malnutrition, and another ten million people in dire need of humanitarian assistance, cannot go unnoticed by the Persian Gulf countries.<sup>437</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE's direct intervention in Yemen, as well as Iran's alleged military and official moral support of the Houthis, compel these countries provide humanitarian assistance. Regardless of the political differences, Iran and the GCC countries must engage with the United Nations, and the World Food Program in particular, to assist the civilians in Yemen. Furthermore, the newly established organization for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf will have the capacity to convene the aforementioned stakeholders to engage in discussions for collective humanitarian and diplomatic assistance to the reconstruction efforts of Yemen following the end of the civil war.

#### Aim for a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East

The JCPOA is arguably amongst the most comprehensive and verifiable nuclear frameworks established by the IAEA. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action not only ensures against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also recognizes the right to a peaceful nuclear

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<sup>436</sup> "Emergency Operation In Yemen"

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

program. Foreign Minister Zarif reiterated in an article that the JCPOA “cements Iran’s status as a zone free of nuclear weapons. Now it is high time that we expand that zone to encompass the entire Middle East.”<sup>438</sup> As more countries, including GCC member states, are developing nuclear infrastructures for growing energy demands, it is essential to further enhance the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and pursue WMD Free Zones with the objective to inhibit proliferation and eliminate global WMD stockpiles. In the Middle East, however, Israel continues to be the only impediment to a WMD Free Zone, while all other states in the region have vowed to accept and implement this proposition. Iran, the GCC member states, and the rest of the international community minus five countries have signed, ratified, and are abiding by the NPT. Israel, the only country in the Middle East that has a total disregard for the NPT, is also the only country in the region that has an active WMD program.

The new regional security architecture must ensure a WMD Free Zone in the Persian Gulf with the aspiration to eventually incorporate the entire region. The Emir of Qatar stated during his statement at the 2015 United Nations General Assembly, two months after the finalization of the JCPOA, that

The agreement between Iran and the 5+1 Group is a positive and important step. As we look forward with hope that this nuclear agreement contributes to maintaining security and stability in our region, we further demand moving forward to disarm the entire region of nuclear arms and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>439</sup>

The remarks by the Qatari Emir is in line with the sentiments of other GCC countries. The demand for a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East has been reiterated on numerous occasions by various leaders in the region. The fourteenth operative paragraph of UNSC Resolution 687, that was adopted in 1991 following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, takes note of the

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<sup>438</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, “Iran has signed a historic nuclear deal – now it’s Israel’s turn,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015.

<sup>439</sup> Statement by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani. September 28, 2015

steps towards “establishing in the Middle East a zone free from WMDs and all missiles for their delivery and the objective of a global ban on chemical weapons.”<sup>440</sup> However, this attempt, similar to many other proposals that have been put forward since 1974 up until 2017, have failed in large part to the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada’s rejection of such a proposal for reasons tied to their support for Israel.<sup>441</sup> These past shortcomings, however, must not discourage the region in pursuing a WMD Free Zone. It is hoped that through the established organization, Iran and the GCC countries further advance this collective goal by establishing a zone free of WMDs in the Persian Gulf that can more feasibly achieve a broader regional zone in the Middle East.

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<sup>440</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 687 (1991)

<sup>441</sup> Kelsey Davenport, “WMD-Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance,” *Arms Control Association*, June 2015.

### Phase 3: Constructive Dialogue for Sustainable Cooperation

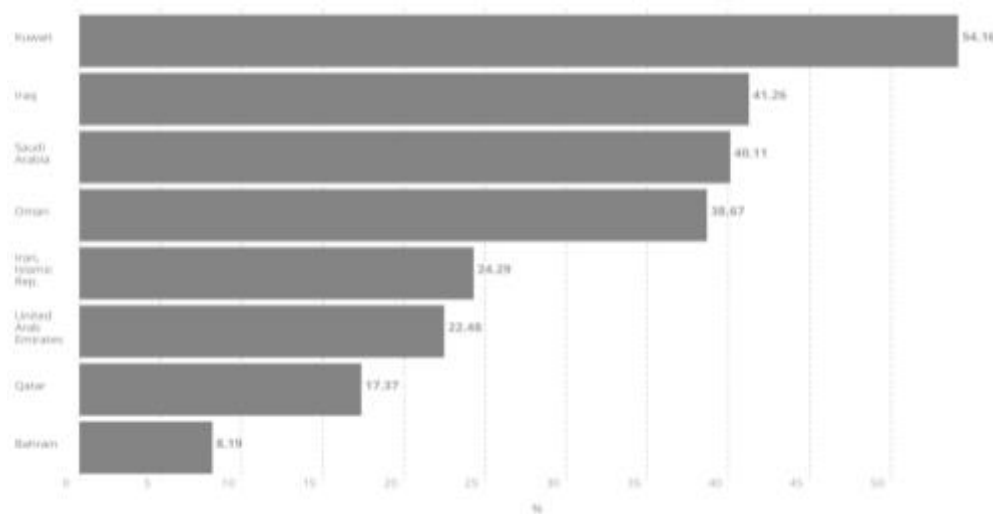
Upon the establishment of a regional organization, and the successful progress in bilateral and multilateral negotiations, other mutually rewarding areas of cooperation should be incorporated into the organization to further advance the interests of the countries involved. While the negotiations phase addresses key domains that require immediate attention by Iran and the GCC countries, this phase aims to institutionalize areas that more directly attend to the needs of the people of the region. The majority of these areas of cooperation have roots in bilateral relations, and many have been initiated by track two and track three diplomatic efforts by non-governmental organization, former government officials, businesses and corporations, artists and ordinary people. The third phase will formalize four primary overarching committees under the broader organization: Trade and economic partnerships, renewable and non-renewable energy, environment, and social exchanges. These committees are based on the organizational structure of international governmental organizations, and tailored to the needs and requirements of the member states.

#### Trade and Economic Partnerships

As the most important aspect of the relationship between Iran and the GCC countries, trade and economic partnerships have produced tangible outcome and benefits for these countries and their people. The organization's trade department must pursue a feasible and all-benefiting free trade agreement between the eight countries. A free trade agreement that formally recognizes the region as a free trade zone supports the domestic trade and economic sectors within, and ensures economic engagement between the countries. Furthermore, free trade increases productivity, efficiency, and overall producer and consumer satisfaction through the

removal of trade barriers, strengthened comparative advantage, and ultimately an increase in exports and imports.

Graph 1. Total Rents from Natural Resources as A Percentage of GDP (World Bank, 2014)



Moreover, free trade agreements and the establishment of a free trade zone are essential factors in further supporting the non-energy sectors of these oil and gas rich countries. Graph 1 illustrates the high allocation of natural resources in all eight littoral states of the Persian Gulf. With the exception of Bahrain, the seven countries significantly rely on oil and gas rents. As the sharp decline and fluctuation of oil prices have illustrated that since July 2014 the rentier economies are in need of revamping their economies and investing in traditional agricultural and industrial sectors, as well as modern entrepreneurial businesses, and technology based startups. Pursuing a formal free and fair trade agreement between Iran, Iraq, and the GCC countries is the ultimate regional economic arrangement that can further enhance existing bilateral trade relations, as well as accelerate the economic growth of these countries.

## Renewable and Non-Renewable Energy

Even though all the eight countries are increasingly pivoting away from sole reliance on rents from natural resources, oil and gas exports will continue to carry significance for the foreseeable future. As detailed in Chapter 2, joint investments on shared and exclusive oil and gas fields in the Persian Gulf are lucrative areas of cooperation. Iran and Qatar's shared gas field is an example of energy interdependency in the Persian Gulf where there are operational and proposed gas pipelines from the South Pars/North Dome fields to other GCC countries, Iraq, and across the region. These pipelines can have an enduring impact on bilateral and multilateral relations due to the fact that these countries are in need of sustained gas imports. The organization's committee on energy can facilitate the exploration, research, and development of previously proposed and new arenas for joint investments. In addition to satisfying the gas needs of the GCC countries, the long-lasting nature of these pipelines will further bind the countries together and secure long-term cooperation.

Another area for energy cooperation among the Persian Gulf countries is renewable energy, especially nuclear. The JCPOA not only ensures the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program, but also provides a blueprint for other countries who are signatories to the NPT and are keen to develop peaceful nuclear programs. The IAEA's additional protocol, for example, which Iran, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain have implemented, is among the few internationally recognized verification mechanism, which Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman, are required to adopt as a verification measure. Such actions that satisfy the mandate by the IAEA, can lead to numerous positive end products desperately needed by many countries in the region; including electricity production, nuclear medicine, and water desalination. Furthermore, to counter rising domestic demand for non-renewable energy resources, especially for domestic electricity

production and water desalination, Iran, Iraq, and the GCC countries must adopt more cost-effective approaches, including nuclear technology, and other renewable sources of energy.

Due to the high costs associated with the construction of nuclear plants, the security risks, the lack of technical expertise, countries are often discouraged to pursue a homegrown nuclear program. The GCC countries all recognize the sovereign right to a peaceful nuclear program, and jointly commissioned a study to explore the possibilities of nuclear development in 2006.<sup>442</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE have heavily invested in domestic nuclear programs for peaceful purposes, the latter awaiting operationalization in 2017.<sup>443</sup> While, on the other hand, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman have abandoned their nuclear aspirations largely due to Japan's Fukushima disaster in 2012.<sup>444</sup> Even though the majority of the GCC countries do not have and do not desire to have nuclear programs, all regional countries can benefit from the already established Iranian program.

The fact that Iran's nuclear program has been an international concern since 2002, giving rise to a series of inspections and verification regimes, further reinforces its capacity as a peaceful regional partner in the development of nuclear programs. Moreover, Iran's successful enrichment capabilities, scientific expertise, and existing nuclear medical research and cancer treatment initiatives, can be a source for cooperation and partnerships with the GCC countries. Nuclear cooperation will not only assist in enhancing bilateral and multilateral relation, but also an important factor inhibiting the proliferation of WMDs within the member states of this organization.

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<sup>442</sup> Carole Nakhle, "Nuclear Energy's Future in the Middle East and North Africa," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, January 28, 2016.

<sup>443</sup> Celine Malek, "UAE's first nuclear power plant could begin operating by May," *The National*, January 22, 2017.

<sup>444</sup> Nakhle, "Nuclear Energy's Future"



## Environment

The shared environmental challenges that Iran and the GCC countries have endured in the past decade or so, have had wide ranging negative consequences. The seven countries, along with Iraq, face various problems on different levels, including, but not limited to sand and dust storms, air and marine pollution, acid rain, water scarcity, drought and desertification. Furthermore, there has been severe damages to crops and machinery, investments opportunities, and more importantly, there has been a rise in serious health issues for the people impacted by these environmental challenges. According to Saudi Arabia's permanent representative to the World Meteorological Organization, the dust storms are “a big problem for the next generation.”<sup>445</sup>

Iran, Iraq, and all of the GCC countries have encountered severe sand and dust storms. Schools have been closed, power grids have been damaged, and respiratory health issues have resulted in long term repercussions. No substantial multilateral measure has been taken to tackle the root causes of the dust and sand storms. The burdensome financial costs to counter these environmental challenges has continued to increase. Iran, for example, needs to invest close to three hundred million dollars just to combat the dust storms. Even though higher than previous allocations, Iran's 2017 budget allocated only one hundred million dollars to fight these challenges, a third of what is desperately needed.<sup>446</sup> Furthermore, individual actions by these countries might have solve the problems for a short period, however, the long-term actions require multilateral cooperation.

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<sup>445</sup> Vesala Todorova, “Rise in dust storms hitting UAE big problem for next generation,” *The National*, May 7, 2013.

<sup>446</sup> “\$100m for Combating Dust Storms in Iran,” *Financial Tribune*, March 5, 2017.

According to a report on the severity of the dust storm in Iraq by the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 2005 the devastating dust storms in Iraq waft through the neighboring countries and are among the primary reasons for the health and environmental problems in these countries. The report states:

Dust storms [in Iraq] are driven by a northwest wind called the shamal that can rip through the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys of central and southern Iraq at any time of the year, but which blows almost constantly through June and July. Shamal winds can last for several days in a row, strengthening during the day and weakening at night, and creating devastating dust storms. Shamals cause some of the most destructive dust storms in the Middle East.<sup>447</sup>

With the fight against Daesh and the rebuilding efforts of the post 2003-Iraq, there is little expectation that the Iraqi government will have the ability to tackle the dust storms unilaterally. Thus, through regional cooperation, the eight members of the newly established organization will have to aim to find adequate solutions to counter the growing environmental challenges. While there has been an effort by the United Nations Environmental Program to bring all regional countries impacted by the sand and dust storms to cooperate and tackle the issue in a multilateral forum, these efforts have not been successful in implementing a mutually acceptable and applicable agreement.<sup>448</sup> At a time when the harm by these sand and dust storms is increasing at a rapid speed, under an environmental mandate by the new organization that solely focuses on these eight countries, cooperation can arguably facilitate a long term partnership and help ease the various negative costs to the people of the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>447</sup> "Iraq Dust Storms," *National Aeronautics and Space Administration Website*, August 10, 2015.

<sup>448</sup> Todorova, "Rise in Dust Storms"

## Social Exchanges

Social exchanges require facilitation by governments as well as regional and international organizations. As one of the most important areas that is seldom encouraged between Iran and the GCC countries, people to people exchanges are pressingly required to foster understanding and to defuse the sectarian tensions that have plagued the Middle East. To foster social exchanges with these objectives, the organization must adopt four primary subcommittees on cultural, religious, educational, and sport exchanges.

## Cultural

Exchanges that include tourism and travel, scholarly collaboration on the history of the region, as well as the showcasing of the arts, music, film, and theatre, are among the many ways one can truly understand the neighboring countries and the differences in their cultures, societal settings, and traditions. However, such cultural exchanges, similar to the majority of other people-to-people interactions, mostly occur between Iran and the UAE. The governments, through the ministries of culture, are responsible in showcasing their country's culture as well as promoting dialogue and understanding of other cultures. Arranging cultural exhibitions that publicize travel and tourism and organizing annual film and music festivals are two of many examples of ways in which cultural exchanges can be established between Iran and the GCC countries. In addition, these exchanges should be bound to the eight members of the organization until meaningful progress has been attained, and other regional countries may be incorporated in the subsequent stages as such issues pertain to the people of the entire region.

One major initiative to consider is a visa free travel within the member states of the organization. As Iraq is undergoing a fight against terrorist organizations and has yet to fully secure its borders, it is unwise to wave the visa requirement for Iraq. However, visa free travel is

crucially essential to foster understanding of the other countries, as well as promote further interdependency and interactions among people. There are numerous flights to and from the GCC countries on a daily basis, however, the majority are transits to other international destinations. As illustrated in Table 4, there were around 90 flights a week from Iran's international airports to Dubai, 13 to Abu Dhabi, 25 to Sharjah, 21 to Kuwait, 15 to Muscat, 1 to Manama, 31 to Doha, and none to Saudi Arabia in April of 2017.<sup>449</sup> Even though the majority of the passengers in these flights do not leave the airport during their transit, visa free travel allows at least part of the travelers to actually visit these cities. Moreover, a visa free system supports and encourages other type of exchanges and economic cooperation that advances mutual interests.

Table 4. Weekly Flights from Four Major Iranian Airports to Cities in the GCC Countries

Destination	Number of Flights Per Week				Total Flights Per Week From/To Iran
	From/To Tehran	From/To Mashhad	From/To Isfahan	From/To Shiraz	
<b>Dubai</b>	64	9	5	12	90
<b>Abu Dhabi</b>	13	/	/	/	13
<b>Sharjah</b>	9	6	3	7	25
<b>Doha</b>	20	8	/	3	31
<b>Muscat</b>	8	7	/	/	15
<b>Kuwait</b>	3	12	2	4	21
<b>Manama</b>	/	1	/	/	1

<sup>449</sup> The number of weekly flights from four major Iranian airports to cities in the GCC countries have been calculated by a travel office in Tehran on April 10, 2017.

## Religious

A meaningful conference that includes high level Islamic leaders from all eight countries with a focus on Sunni-Shia commonalities based on the five pillars of Islam is necessary to combat sectarianism and the divisions among Muslims. Iran, based on the core of its foreign and domestic policies, has attempted on numerous occasions to foster Islamic unity. Since the date of birth of the Prophet Mohammad is contested by five days between the Sunni and Shi'a, Iran has named the days in between as the 'Unity Week' which gathers Islamic scholars, clergy, and diplomats from different sects of Islam to celebrate the festivities. The concept of the Unity Week is in line with Deutsche's proposal of group occasions as one of the barriers to the breakup of cooperation. The establishment of group occasions as part of the regional conflict resolution process are important, as they help "foster group unity and identification with the group."<sup>450</sup>

Furthermore, as another measure to ensure against the breakup of the cooperative phase, Deutsche says that all members of the organization must honor and cherish the individuality of each nations and buttress the right to differ.<sup>451</sup> The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, proposed and established by Ayatollah Khamenei in 1990, holds a conference annually during Unity Week to reduce the differences based on sects and to promote the teachings of the Quran and the *Sonnat* of the Prophet Mohammad, that are shared among the majority of Muslims.<sup>452</sup> These efforts, however, have not cultivated the required support and participation from the GCC countries to succeed in defusing the rise of sectarianism. Thus, it is

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<sup>450</sup> Deutsch, "Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict"

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> I took part in the Unity Week Conference in Tehran on December 27, 2015, and witnessed Iran's efforts in bridging the Shi'a-Sunni divide. While these measures by the Islamic Republic arguably earn praise, the lackluster participation of the GCC countries was evident. Defusing and ultimately ending sectarianism in the Muslim world is unattainable without the involvement and contribution of these Arab countries and their collaboration with the Iran, and the Unity Week will not live up to its name until more concrete and tangible actions are taken by all sides to attempt at being unified under the banner of Islam.

crucial to find other avenues, such as the month of Ramadan or the Eid Fitr, to implement religious exchanges between Iran and the GCC to gather key clergymen who have social influence, as well as the desire and determination to end the sectarian divide.

### Educational

Educational exchanged between students and scholars in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and the humanities, will be an essential avenue to foster understanding and cooperation between the next generation of the region. A number of American and European universities have branches in the GCC, and due to their proximity to Iran, these universities have been a destination for Iranian students since the end of the 1990s.<sup>453</sup> However, as previously mentioned, the majority of the people-to-people exchanges between Iranians and Arabs occur in Dubai. As one of the quintessential areas of interaction among the people from different countries, educational exchanges allow an unfiltered and apolitical avenue for students to research, collaborate, and build bridges of understanding.

Furthermore, a formal committee under the organization can support the existing platforms for exchanges, especially in technology and entrepreneurial endeavors, and seek to facilitate the creation of similar organizations in other fields. Examples include the Iranian iBridges and the Arab TechWadi who successfully collaborated at a conference in Berlin in 2015 that brought together technology focused students and entrepreneurs.<sup>454</sup> As Zahawi and Beydoun argue: “Such an exchange of grassroots opportunities is exactly how commerce can create commonality between rivaling factions, antagonistic ethnic divisions, and divisive sectarian

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<sup>453</sup> Including my brother who lived and studied in Dubai from 2002 to 2005.

<sup>454</sup> Hamada Zahawi and Khaled Beydoun, “Divesting From Sectarianism: Reimagining Relations Between Iran And The Arab Gulf States,” *Journal of International Affairs* (May 18, 2016)

beliefs.”<sup>455</sup> The exchange of ideas, practices, as well as goods and services between Iranians and Persian Gulf Arabs through channels such as the iBridges conference can advance partnerships and cooperation in a multitude of ways that often disregard political tensions.

The humanities also offer an important area for educational exchanges. Sara Masry, a Saudi Arabian who lived and studied in Tehran for almost two years starting in 2014, created a website entitled ‘Saudi in Iran’ to share her experience in Iran with fellow citizens as well as the rest of the region. She says about the confusions her decision to study in Tehran University carried in Iran and across the GCC, that:

I know that many from my region may not understand my decision or my point of view towards this country. Tensions between Iran and most GCC states have never been so high, at least not in my lifetime. Nevertheless, I do not believe that is reason enough to harpoon potential socio-cultural relations between entire populations, or add oil to the fire. I came here wanting to learn the truth about a country that many still see as a no-go zone. My Saudi nationality egged me on even more, in my hope and belief that the good nature of people should and will always trump politics. I have been in no way disappointed.”<sup>456</sup>

Masry’s studies in Tehran were cut short due to the political tensions in January 2016. However, her endeavor in providing a rarely seen, yet experienced, Arab view on Iran has had far-reaching audience. Such educational exchanges between Iranians and Arabs continues to be unheard of in most countries in the Middle East, aside from the UAE and Qatar which host Iranian students rather than sending students to Iranian universities. To change this imbalance, the Islamic Republic must recognize that it is responsible for providing incentives to attract students to Iran.

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Sara Masry, “Step One,” *Saudi in Iran Blog*, May 5, 2015.

## Sport

Sports have demonstrated on numerous occasions their capacity to supersede political, cultural, and religious differences. Through international and regional sporting events and leagues, Iran and the GCC countries face each other in various stadiums around the world and within the region. As members of the Asian Football Confederation and its champions league, Iran and the GCC states are part of a broad regional soccer organization. However, a sub-regional league does not exist that encompasses the GCC countries, Iraq, and Iran. By establishing such a soccer championship that operates on an annual basis, a long-lasting interaction is guaranteed that not only brings together the multiple teams from each of the countries, but also the thousands, in some cases millions, of supporters, devotees, and fans. The social committee within the organization can facilitate and direct the establishment of such a Persian Gulf Champions League.

A key area for sporting collaboration between Iran and the GCC countries is women in sports. The limitations on women in practicing sports in public and participation in international competitions as citizens of these Muslims countries have not dissuaded their female populations. The women from Iran and the GCC countries have managed to take part on the international stage, while preserving their country's principles as well as their religion's guidelines. Fostering further female-focused exchanges between Iran, Iraq, the GCC countries, and eventually the wider Muslim world is essential in realizing professional aspirations of the women in these countries, as well as facilitating their presence and achievements on the international stage. Moreover, by organizing different sporting events for women, as well as training exchanges between leading figures and rising stars of these eight countries, the social committee of the organization can encourage people-to-people exchanges, and advance the interest of the Iranian and Arab women.



## CONCLUSION

Many areas of dispute exist between Iran and the GCC, however, numerous domains for positive interactions is also present in the bilateral and multilateral relations between the Persian Gulf neighbors. In this thesis, I presented the debate by scholars and analysts on Iran's foreign policy determinants, its objectives in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East, as well its approach towards the GCC countries. While it is argued that the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology, as well as the impact of several key events, are essential factors in the foreign affairs of the country, this approach does not sufficiently address the modus operandi of the various political factions that exist in Iran. The varying approaches by the different presidents of the Islamic Republic, especially ever since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, elucidates the importance of a leader-centric analysis of Iran's approach towards the GCC countries. The Rouhani administration's strategic maneuverings in foreign relations, different from his predecessor and comparable with the approaches by Ayatollah Rafsanjani and President Khatami, initiated a calculated international engagement which resulted in the JCPOA and altered the geopolitical status quo of the Persian Gulf region. This difference in policy formulation is the most important realization of the existing polarity within the Islamic Republic; and as a result, the country's bilateral and multilateral relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Chapter 2 of this thesis explicates the lack of a uniform position within the GCC towards Iran. Realizing that the Persian Gulf nations are also not monolithic, and that various factors, including the level of economic interactions, as well as historical and religious linkages, permits the effectuation of cooperative relations between Iran and the GCC countries, which is the objective of this thesis. The cordial diplomatic relations with Oman, the vast amount of economic and trade relations with the UAE, the cultural ties with Kuwait, and shared resources

with Qatar, are examples of positive interactions between Iran and some of the GCC countries. These constructive aspects of Iran's relations with some of the Persian Gulf states has inhibited, in large part, the escalation of disputes to perpetual conflicts.

The negative factors in the bilateral relationships, with Saudi Arabia, including the rivalry for dominance in the region, with Bahrain, involving the sectarian disputes, and with the UAE, over the three Persian Gulf islands, however, are reoccurring grievances of these GCC countries which have had damaging impacts on the geopolitics of the region in the past decades. With the reinvigoration of the nuclear negotiations since 2013 and the signing of the JCPOA on July 2015, these various disputes have once again resurfaced, and have defined Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. At the same time, or as a result of the JCPOA, the GCC countries, nominally Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, have redoubled their efforts to not only undermine Iran's reengagement with the international community, but have also augmented their direct and indirect confrontations with the Islamic Republic. The execution of Sheikh Nimr, for example, was a political decision by Saudi Arabia that prompted harsh reactions in Iran, led to the storming of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic offices in the Islamic Republic, and consequently, resulted in the termination and reduction of diplomatic ties by the majority of the GCC countries with Iran.

Moreover, the conflicts throughout the Middle East, specifically in Syria and Yemen, prompted further hostilities between Iran and the GCC countries. These conflicts led to a rise in sectarian and identity politics that have divided the region in a rarely witnessed manner. In addition, the post-2016 policies of the neighboring countries have largely led to zero-sum outcomes for all sides, and the administration of Donald Trump in the United States has further fueled these contentions. With a trilateral U.S.-GCC-Israel cooperation proposal surfacing since

February 2017, coupled with the already existing strong ties between the GCC countries and the United States, are not only major threats to the Islamic Republic, but also have the potential of changing the decades of manageable conflicts and disputes to a perpetual conflict which they have inhibited in the past. While these opposing approaches to regional matters are detrimental to the prospects of a cooperative future, they, at the same time, impel Iran and the GCC countries to constructively cooperate in the interest of peace and stability of the region.

The pathway proposed in Chapter 4, can be viewed as a blueprint of the predominant requirements of the Persian Gulf region to foster constructive cooperation and diminish the chances of a long-term and direct conflict. Drawing on conflict resolution tools and theory, the pathway has three sequential phases of mediation, negotiations, and constructive dialogue. Using the stakeholders, specifically Oman and Kuwait, as mediators between Iran and other GCC countries, the first phase, which has been initiated since the start of 2017, aims to present opportunities as well as prepare the foundations for serious engagement between all sides. With their success, the following phase must include separate bilateral negotiations with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE on the aforementioned disputes to allow the establishment of a regional security and cooperation forum upon tangible progress in the negotiations. This proposed forum, similar to the OSCE, will have the objective of providing a platform for discussions and negotiations over security and stability of the Persian Gulf, combatting violent extremism, collaboration on humanitarian assistance to the regional war-thorn countries, and aiming for a WMD free zone in the Middle East.

With the achievement of real and substantial progress in the negotiations phase, the pathways can move forward to the final phase of establishing four comprehensive committees on the trade and economic relations with the goal of a free trade agreement, on renewable and non-

renewable energy cooperation to establish interdependence and satisfy the needs of the member states, on the environment to fight against the devastating impacts of sand and dust storms, as well as on social exchanges. As a way to promote people-to-people exchanges, four sub committees are necessary: cultural, for visa free travel, religious, to counter sectarianism, educational, to increase student and entrepreneurial exchanges, as well as sports, for the creation of a soccer league and increased encouragement for, and competition between, the women of the region. These proposed areas for dialogue and the establishment of such a regional organization will benefit the people of the region, while at the same time, brings Iran and the GCC countries closer than ever before.

At the time when contentions are exceeding and chances of a deterioration of relations is high, this thesis attempts to present the wide-range of mostly untapped opportunities to once again alter the costly and dangerous status quo and effectuate a cooperative future between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

## APPENDIX 1.

### Articles Pertaining to Foreign Policy in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

#### Sections One

##### Chapter I: General Principles

- Article 3: 16. the organization of the nation's foreign policy based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world.
- Article 11: According to the Qur'an: "Verily, this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood. And I am your Lord and cherisher: therefore, serve me" (21: 92), all Muslims form a single nation and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is required to base its overall politics on the merging and unity of the Muslim nations. It must continuously strive to achieve the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Muslim world.
- Article 12: The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school of [Shi'a] religion. This principle shall remain eternally unchangeable. Other Islamic schools of thought, such as the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are deserving of total respect and their followers are free to perform their own religious practices, religious education, and personal matters. They may practice their religious education, personal status, (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and bequest), in accordance with their own jurisprudence.

##### Chapter Nine: The Executive Power

##### Section Two: The Army and the Islamic Pasdaran Revolutionary Corps

- Article 145: No foreigner will be admitted in the army or the security forces of the country.
- Article 146: It is forbidden to establish any kind of foreign military base in the country, even for peaceful purposes.

##### Chapter Ten: Foreign Policy

- Article 152: The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the domineering powers; mutual peaceful relations with non- aggressive states.

- Article 153: Any form of agreement that would result in foreign domination over the natural and economic resources, foreign domination over culture, the army, and other affairs of the country, is forbidden.
- Article 154: The Islamic Republic of Iran considers human happiness throughout human society as its ideal. It considers independence, freedom, and the governance of justice and truth as the right of all the people of the world. Consequently, while it completely abstains from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world.

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