

Ideational Factors and Regime Security in Post-Arab Spring Realignments: Analyzing Türkiye-Gulf Arab States Relations (2011-2022)

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Abstract

This study examines the complex dynamics shaping relations between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. It addresses the central question: “How has the Arab Spring reconfigured alignments between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States?” The research posits that Middle Eastern geopolitics can be more comprehensively understood through a framework that synthesizes material and ideational factors. It argues that the fluctuating convergence and divergence between these actors are primarily driven by ideational factors, with material considerations playing a significant secondary role. The study employs the regime security approach as its theoretical foundation, complemented by process tracing methodology to analyze the political, economic, and social dimensions of Türkiye-Gulf Arab States relations. This multifaceted approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of regional realignments and contribute to the broader discourse on Middle Eastern security dynamics. By focusing on the interplay between ideational factors and regime security concerns, this research offers novel insights into the evolving nature of inter-state relations in the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, Türkiye, Gulf Arab States, Regime Security, Regional Realignments.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle Eastern regional order is characterized by a dynamic interplay of competition, conflict, and cooperation among various state actors (Amour, 2020). This study examines the complex relations between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States in the wake of the Arab Spring, focusing on the period from 2011 to 2022. The central research question guiding this investigation is: How has the Arab Spring reshaped the alignments between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States?

This research posits that the emergence and transformation of intra-regional rivalries (Amour, 2020) during this period can be explained through a synthesis of ideational and material factors. While ideational elements, particularly those related to political Islam and regime security, play a predominant role, material considerations significantly influence these dynamics as well. The study argues that the rise of ideas potent enough to challenge existing political structures increases the likelihood of regional competition and conflict, while the waning of such ideas facilitates normalization among competing actors.

The Arab Spring, which began in 2010, initiated a profound transformation across the region (Hamzaoglu & Merdan, 2024; Hinnebusch, 2014), leading to the proliferation and realignment of various conflict lines. This series of uprisings had two significant impacts on regional politics. First, it destabilized many traditional Arab powers, causing them to shift from active to more passive roles in regional affairs. Consequently, countries like Egypt and Syria, which had historically shaped Arab politics, were relegated to secondary roles. This power vacuum created an opportunity for the Gulf Arab states (Hinnebusch, 2019), with their relatively stable domestic politics and substantial material resources, to assume more prominent roles in regional dynamics. Second, the initial phase of the uprisings saw a shift in the balance of power from the Iranian-led resistance axis to the Saudi-led pro-Western bloc. The credibility of Hezbollah and Iran diminished in the Arab public sphere, while Türkiye and Qatar moved closer to the anti-Iran camp. Simultaneously, Sunni Islamist and pro-democracy movements gained traction against authoritarian nationalist regimes in countries like Libya and Syria, further weakening the dominant resistance discourse.

In this context, the idea of Political Islam, which gained significant influence during the Arab Spring, became a critical point of contention. It pitted actors who embraced and instrumentalized it to shape the regional order against those who perceived it as a vital threat to their political models. Political Islam emerged as the most significant ideational threat to the security of many authoritarian status quo regimes in the region. The concept of regime security, a crucial component of the political security sector, has always been a top priority for the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East. To explore these dynamics, the study employs the regime security approach as its theoretical framework, complemented by process tracing methodology. This combination allows for a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic, and social aspects of convergence and divergence between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States. By focusing on the interplay between ideational factors and regime security concerns, this research aims

to contribute to the growing discourse on regional security and fill a gap in the literature, which has predominantly emphasized material determinants in analyzing Türkiye-Gulf relations.

The literature on Türkiye-Gulf Arab States relations is ever-growing. However, although there has been an unprecedented increase in the academic literature on Türkiye's relations with the Gulf Arab States since the AK Party came to power, a review of relevant literature reveals that material determinant factors have been heavily focused on, while ideational determinant factors have been neglected. This study aims to contribute to this literature by addressing the issue of regime security, which still tops the list of priorities in the foreign policies of the countries in the region (Üçağaç et al., 2022). In this context, the current study has two main objectives. The first is to contribute to the growing debate on regional security and the second is to fill the aforementioned gap in the literature. It intends to do so by exploring the role of the ideational factors in Türkiye's relations with the Gulf Arab States since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. To this end, the study provides a detailed assessment of Türkiye-Gulf Arab States relations during this period, centering on the issue of regime security.

The study examines how Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States, which had been fostering closer relations and following parallel policies in the region since the early 2000s, entered a period of intense rivalry after the first phase of the Arab Spring, particularly following the 2013 Egyptian coup. However, this competition did not pit Türkiye against a unified bloc of Gulf Arab countries. While pro-change Qatar aligned with Türkiye, status quo powers Saudi Arabia and the UAE, viewing the dominance of authoritarian governments in regional politics as aligning with their interests, positioned themselves in opposition to Türkiye and Qatar. The research argues that the main point of contention between the Turkish-Qatari bloc and the Saudi-UAE bloc stemmed from Türkiye and Qatar's support for Political Islam during the Arab Spring, which had the potential to transform the established political order of the region. Political Islam, represented primarily by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, was perceived as an anti-status quo and revisionist ideology. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo (after the 2013 military coup) viewed this revisionist ideology, supported by Türkiye and Qatar, as a critical threat to the security of their regimes.

The research also explores how these dynamics evolved over time, particularly after 2021, when the influence of the Arab Spring began to wane, and global developments led to a dramatic decline in the influence of Political Islam. This shift caused ideational factors to become less of a priority in the foreign policies of regional actors, leading them to focus more on material interests, especially in light of the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. By examining these complex dynamics, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the evolving nature of inter-state relations in the post-Arab Spring era. It offers insights into how the interplay of ideational and material factors shapes regional alignments and influences the foreign policy decisions of key actors in this volatile region.

This study adopts a qualitative case study design using the process tracing method. Process tracing is a qualitative research approach that allows for the detailed analysis of causal mechanisms within a single case or a limited set of cases. It involves systematically examining empirical evidence to trace how particular events or sequences of events contribute to specific outcomes. As Andrew Bennett notes, process tracing facilitates the identification and analysis of diagnostic evidence that helps explain change over time within a case (Bennett, 2010, p. 8). At the core of this method is the concept of a causal mechanism, a structured framework that outlines how various theoretical elements interact to produce an outcome. According to Checkel, causal mechanisms consist of a set of hypotheses that serve as potential explanations for observed phenomena (Checkel, 2008, p. 115). These mechanisms offer a bridge between diverse theoretical perspectives, enabling researchers to integrate insights from multiple approaches. By uncovering the specific causal processes underlying a phenomenon, process tracing adds analytical depth and enhances our understanding of how and why certain outcomes occur. This makes it particularly well-suited for this research, as it reveals the logic behind causal relationships and provides a clearer understanding of the dynamics at play.

The study employs process tracing to analyze the causal mechanisms underlying the evolution of Türkiye-Gulf Arab states relations during the Arab Spring and its aftermath, using regime security theory as the theoretical lens. Regime security theory posits that states, particularly authoritarian regimes, prioritize actions that safeguard the ruling elite's hold on power. In this context, process tracing facilitates the identification of how threat perceptions, rooted in domestic regime stability concerns, shaped foreign policy responses. By closely examining key events, decisions, and diplomatic shifts from 2010 onward, this method enables a nuanced understanding of how Türkiye's support for Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, was interpreted by Gulf monarchies as a challenge to their internal stability. Process tracing thus helps to reveal the causal process linking ideological divergence and regime insecurity to the growing strategic rivalry between Türkiye and states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This approach not only clarifies the logic behind foreign policy choices but also shows how regime security concerns can override conventional geopolitical interests during periods of regional upheaval.

1.1. Regime Security

The concept of regime security is central to understanding the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics, particularly in the context of the Arab Spring and its aftermath. Proponents of regime security theory argue that threats to domestic stability are the primary drivers shaping a state's security strategies, especially in developing countries where the security of the state and the regime are often intertwined (Job, 1992, p. 15). In the Middle Eastern context, regime security refers to the state in which ruling elites maintain their position against serious internal challenges (Jackson, 2007, p. 148). This concept is particularly relevant to governments that hold power through non-democratic means, as they face persistent challenges related to legitimacy, political fragmentation, and local instability (Ayoob, 1995,

p. 28; Buzan, 1991). Mohammed Ayoob posits that regimes experiencing significant insecurity often perceive internal risks as equally or more important than external threats (Ayoob, 1983, p. 43).

The Arab Spring uprisings brought the issue of regime security into sharp focus, revealing that the most significant threats to regional autocracies were not external actors like Israel or Iran, nor militant jihadist movements, but rather domestic grassroots activism demanding regime change. The rise of Islamist governments in Tunisia and Egypt, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, led to a convergence of authoritarian regimes in the region seeking collective security (Kaddorah, 2021; Ryan, 2017). This study argues that the regime security paradigm is crucial for understanding the realignment of regional alliances following the Arab Spring. The overthrow of long-standing authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt through mass protests was interpreted as an existential threat by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These Gulf states viewed the potential for regional instability and the disruption of the status quo as directly challenging their own regimes' security.

The Muslim Brotherhood's electoral victory in Egypt was particularly alarming to many Gulf Arab regimes, with the notable exception of Qatar. The movement's success in gaining power through popular revolution and democratic elections represented a direct challenge to the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. This led to a rapid reconfiguration of regional alliances, with Egypt, Qatar, and Türkiye forming a closer alliance under Muslim Brotherhood rule, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE aligned against this new axis.

The 2013 military coup in Egypt, which overthrew the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government, marked a critical turning point. It led to a further realignment of regional powers, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE providing substantial financial support to the new Egyptian regime under General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, while Qatar withdrew its backing (Ryan, 2014). In the post-Muslim Brotherhood period, regimes committed to eliminating perceived threats to their security formed stronger alliances. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE emerged as key allies united in their opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, which they viewed as a transnational threat to their legitimacy, security, and stability. These regimes prioritized addressing ideational threats to their rule over responding to other regional crises, such as the Syrian civil war or the rise of extremist groups like the Islamic State. In this regard, this analysis demonstrates how the regime security approach can elucidate the complex interplay between domestic politics and regional alignments in the Middle East. By focusing on the perceived threats to regime stability, we can better understand the motivations behind the shifting alliances and foreign policy decisions of key regional actors in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

2. THE ROOTS OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN TÜRKİYE-GULF ARAB STATES RELATIONS

The Arab Spring fundamentally altered the dynamics of regime security politics in the Middle East, profoundly impacting alliance systems in the region. This period witnessed a significant shift in regional power dynamics, with traditional powers losing influence and new actors emerging. The Gulf

Arab states, leveraging their relative domestic stability and substantial material resources, capitalized on the regional disorder to become prominent actors in regional politics (Abdulla, 2012). Their ability to combine soft and hard power capacities, including economic prosperity, media networks, and transnational group affiliations, enhanced their regional influence (Lynch, 2018). Similarly, Türkiye seized the opportunity to advance its regional position by supporting ideologically aligned groups. Its economic development, strong military, and relative stability positioned it as a significant regional player during this turbulent period.

The rise of the Arab Spring and the toppling of authoritarian regimes elevated regime security to the top of the regional agenda (Ryan, 2017). The election of Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate in Egypt, through democratic means alarmed many Arab regimes, with the exception of Qatar. This event catalyzed the formation of a strong alliance among authoritarian regimes determined to contain perceived threats to their rule. Since 2011, Qatar has strengthened its regional influence through close cooperation with Türkiye, sharing a common perspective on supporting Islamist groups, particularly those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Conversely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceived the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates as existential threats to their regimes, national security, and regional influence, adopting harsh policies against these groups. The divergence between the Türkiye-Qatar and Saudi Arabia-UAE blocs became increasingly apparent following the 2013 overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's government in Egypt. This military coup, supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, replaced the democratically elected Islamist government with a secular-authoritarian military regime, dealing a significant blow to the Türkiye-Qatar alliance that had been shaping regional transformation between 2011 and 2013.

The accession of Salman bin Abdul-Aziz to the Saudi throne in 2015 and the subsequent rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Cordesman, 2015) further galvanized the Saudi-UAE alliance in their efforts to suppress the regional influence of Qatar and Türkiye. The fault line between the two blocs deepened during the 2017 Gulf crisis, in which Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt blockaded Qatar (Kabalan, 2018; Patrick, 2017). Türkiye's response, including the deployment of military forces to Qatar, elevated its relationship with Doha to an unprecedented strategic level while further straining its relations with the Saudi-UAE bloc. Over time, the main fault line in this polarization crystallized between Türkiye and the UAE. The Abu Dhabi administration viewed Ankara as its primary regional rival, while Turkish media portrayed the UAE as an adversary, even attributing the 2016 coup attempt against President Erdoğan to UAE designs (Paksoy, 2017).

The 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul marked a critical juncture in Türkiye-Saudi relations, leading to open hostility between the parties. Ankara's international campaign implicating Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the crime further strained bilateral relations, resulting in economic repercussions and diplomatic tensions. These developments illustrate how ideational factors, particularly the perceived threat of political Islam, interacted with material interests

and regime security concerns to shape the complex and evolving relationships between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab states in the post-Arab Spring era.

3. COMPETITION OVER THE MEDITERRANEAN AND NORTH AFRICA

As the rivalry between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab states intensified, the competition expanded beyond the immediate region and into the Mediterranean and North Africa (Bianco, 2020). This expansion was driven by the Gulf states' regime security concerns and their strategic decision to confront perceived threats at their source. The Eastern Mediterranean region, which became the epicenter of the Arab Spring, emerged as a key battleground for this competition. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, sought to contain Türkiye's influence and stifle the Arab Spring movements that they perceived as existential threats to their regimes. To achieve these objectives, they pursued alliances with European countries that had ongoing disputes with Türkiye.

A notable example of this strategy was the strengthening of ties between the UAE and France, both of which aimed to counter Türkiye's ambitions in the Mediterranean (Aydıntaşbaş & Bianco, 2021). Concurrently, the UAE and Saudi Arabia developed closer relations with Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC), capitalizing on the tensions between these entities and Türkiye over drilling rights off Cyprus. The UAE's participation in the annual Greek-led military exercise (Iniohos/Bridge) from 2017 onwards, alongside the US and Israel, with Egypt as an observer, further underscored the evolving geopolitical alignments in the region (Ahronheim, 2017; Haaretz, 2018). These developments intensified the competition for regional influence between the Gulf Arab countries and Türkiye, with the Mediterranean basin becoming a focal point of this rivalry.

The concentration of Arab Spring uprisings in Mediterranean countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya made this region particularly significant. Two key factors contributed to the Mediterranean's centrality in this competition: first, it housed the primary actors involved in the rivalry (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya), and second, it represented a critical arena where the Gulf states sought to contain Türkiye's expanding influence in the broader Middle East (Cook & Ibish, 2019). This period saw the emergence of two distinct alliance systems: a smaller but more cohesive axis comprising Türkiye, Qatar, and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) (Polat, 2022), opposed by a coalition of Greece, the GCASC, and Israel, supported by Egypt, the UAE, and France. Consequently, the Gulf Arab states, despite not being part of the Eastern Mediterranean regional security complex, became active players in the area's geopolitics. In the North African context, countries like Tunisia and Egypt became pivotal in shaping the trajectory of the Arab Spring. Both Türkiye and the Gulf Arab states invested considerable effort in influencing the political outcomes in these transitional states. Their divergent approaches reflected fundamentally different visions for the region's future.

Türkiye and Qatar supported the Arab Spring protests, democratic transitions, and parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast, the Saudi Arabian-UAE bloc backed counter-

revolutionary forces, former regimes, armies, and anti-Islamist parties (Anzola, 2019; Gill, 2019; Lynch, 2016). The Saudi-UAE alliance viewed the resurgence of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa as a guarantee of their own regime security and offered substantial support to like-minded forces (Gardner, 2019; Wehry, 2015).

The overthrow of long-standing authoritarian leaders like Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt through mass protests was interpreted as a critical threat by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These Gulf states feared that such events could lead to regional instability, disrupt the status quo, and potentially threaten their own regimes. The electoral victories of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties and candidates were seen as direct challenges to their rule. Conversely, Türkiye and Qatar viewed the Muslim Brotherhood movement as an opportunity for regional change that aligned with their interests. They supported the protests and welcomed the electoral successes of Muslim Brotherhood-linked leaders and parties in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. This polarization, rooted in competing visions for a new regional order, continued to intensify until January 2021. However, subsequent developments at local, regional, and global levels began to soften the fierce rivalry between these actors, initiating a process of normalization in their relations.

This analysis demonstrates how the competition over the Mediterranean and North Africa was fundamentally shaped by regime security concerns and ideational factors, particularly the perceived threat or opportunity presented by political Islam. The interplay of these elements with material interests and geopolitical calculations drove the complex and evolving dynamics of regional alignments in the post-Arab Spring era.

4. SOFTENING AND NORMALIZATION IN REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The period beginning in 2021 marked a significant shift in the dynamics of Türkiye-Gulf Arab States relations, characterized by a gradual softening of tensions and movement towards normalization. This transition can be attributed to several interrelated factors, both regional and global, that altered the calculus of regime security and ideational influences in the region. A primary driver of this change was the diminishing influence of the ideational factors that had previously shaped political and geopolitical alignments in the wake of the Arab Spring. The weakening of these ideational threats to regime security facilitated dialogue between previously opposed camps. Specifically, the decline of Political Islam as a potent force in regional politics reduced the perceived existential threat to established regimes, creating space for diplomatic rapprochement.

Several key events contributed to this ideational shift. The 2013 military coup in Egypt, which deposed the Islamist Morsi government (Daragahi & Heba, 2013), the defeat of the Islamist Ennahda movement by the secular Nida Tounes party in Tunisia's 2014 elections (The Times of Israel, 2014), and the devolution of the Syrian revolution into a protracted civil war collectively signaled the reversal of the Arab Spring's transformative potential. By 2021, Political Islam, which had been the most

influential ideational movement of the Arab Spring, no longer posed a significant threat to established regimes. Concurrently, regional competition and global developments exposed the economic vulnerabilities of key actors. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, forced a reevaluation of priorities. The economic toll of geopolitical activism, previously overshadowed by ideological and political struggles, became increasingly untenable. This economic pressure manifested as a deepening crisis in Türkiye (Çakmaklı et al., 2021) and significant economic challenges in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (Miller, 2020).

Global political shifts also played a crucial role in this regional recalibration. The election of Joe Biden as the US President in 2020 heralded changes in American regional policy. The Biden administration's departure from the Trump era's "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran and its more measured support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE prompted regional actors to reassess their positions. The US signaling a potential return to the Iran nuclear agreement and a continued reduction in regional engagements led its regional allies to seek alternative strategies, including deepening relations with China and Russia while simultaneously de-escalating tensions with regional rivals (Dalay, 2021). These developments necessitated a restructuring of regional policies among the rival parties (Ataman, 2021, 2022; Yeşiltaş, 2022). As the regional status quo, disrupted by the Arab Spring, began to re-establish itself, Saudi Arabia and the UAE initiated a rapprochement with Qatar and Türkiye, which had previously supported forces of change. The Turkish-Qatari bloc, fatigued by prolonged competition, reciprocated these overtures.

The normalization process gained significant momentum with the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, on January 5, 2021 (Khalid, 2021). At this summit, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced the end of their embargo and blockade against Qatar, restoring diplomatic relations (Al-Raşid, 2021; BBC News, 2021; Ulrichsen et al., 2021). Türkiye, as Qatar's strategic partner, welcomed these developments and expressed support for a comprehensive resolution to intra-Gulf conflicts (Battaloğlu, 2021; Çelik, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2021). High-level visits following the Al-Ula Agreement further strengthened Riyadh-Doha relations, exemplified by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Qatar in December 2021 (Aljazeera, 2021).

The normalization process extended to Türkiye-Gulf relations as well. The visit of UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to Ankara in November 2021, after a decade-long hiatus, marked a turning point in UAE-Türkiye relations (Duran, 2021; Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research [SETAV], 2021; The Arab Weekly, 2021; Ulrichsen, et al., 2021). This was reciprocated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Abu Dhabi in February 2022, during which the two countries signed agreements across various sectors and pledged cooperation against common threats (Duran, 2022; Turak, 2022). Similarly, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, which had been at odds since the 2013 Egyptian coup and experienced further strain following the Qatar blockade and the Jamal Khashoggi

murder, began normalization talks. President Erdogan's visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2022 and the subsequent visit of Mohammed bin Salman to Ankara in June 2022 signaled a mutual desire to reset bilateral relations (Aljazeera, 2022; Baycar, 2022; Coşkun, 2022; Daily Sabah, 2022; Maher, 2022; Reuters, 2022). This normalization process demonstrates the dynamic nature of regional relationships and the complex interplay between ideational factors, regime security concerns, and material interests. As the perceived ideational threats diminished and economic pressures mounted, pragmatic considerations led to a recalibration of regional alignments, highlighting the fluid nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics in the post-Arab Spring era.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex dynamics shaping relations between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, focusing on the period from 2011 to 2022. By analyzing the interplay of ideational and material factors, with a particular emphasis on regime security concerns, we have sought to elucidate the causal mechanisms behind the fluctuating patterns of rivalry and cooperation in the region. The research demonstrates that the emergence and transformation of intra-regional competition during this period can be effectively explained through a synthesis of ideational and material factors. While ideational elements, particularly those related to political Islam and regime security, played a predominant role, material considerations significantly influenced these dynamics as well. The study's findings support the argument that the rise of ideas potent enough to challenge existing political structures increases the likelihood of regional competition and conflict, while the waning of such ideas facilitates normalization among competing actors.

The Arab Spring served as a critical juncture, reshaping regional alignments and power dynamics. It destabilized traditional Arab powers, creating a vacuum that allowed the Gulf Arab states and Türkiye to assume more prominent roles in regional affairs. The initial phase of the uprisings saw a shift in the balance of power from the Iranian-led resistance axis to the Saudi-led pro-Western bloc, with Türkiye and Qatar aligning more closely with the anti-Iran camp.

The study reveals that the main point of contention between the Turkish-Qatari bloc and the Saudi-UAE bloc stemmed from their divergent approaches to Political Islam during the Arab Spring. Türkiye and Qatar's support for Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, was perceived as an existential threat by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 coup Egypt. This ideological divide became the primary driver of regional realignments, with regime security concerns at the forefront of foreign policy decision-making for these actors. The research highlights how the concept of regime security, as articulated by scholars such as Ayoob (1983) and Jackson (2007), provides a valuable framework for understanding the motivations behind these regional dynamics. The prioritization of internal threats over external ones by authoritarian regimes in the region aligns with the theoretical

predictions of regime security theory and explains many of the observed patterns of alliance formation and conflict.

The study also demonstrates the evolving nature of these dynamics over time. The gradual decline in the influence of Political Islam, coupled with economic pressures exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and shifts in global politics, led to a recalibration of regional relationships from 2021 onward. This period of softening and normalization underscores the fluid nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the pragmatic considerations that can override ideological differences when circumstances change.

By employing a multifaceted approach that combines the regime security framework with process tracing methodology, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of regional security dynamics in the Middle East. It fills a gap in the literature by highlighting the crucial role of ideational factors in shaping Türkiye-Gulf relations, an aspect that has been underemphasized in previous studies focusing primarily on material determinants. The findings of this study have significant implications for both academic discourse and policy considerations. They suggest that any comprehensive analysis of Middle Eastern geopolitics must account for the complex interplay between ideational factors, regime security concerns, and material interests. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of considering the dynamic nature of these relationships, as seemingly entrenched rivalries can give way to pragmatic cooperation when the underlying conditions change.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring how the balance between ideational and material factors might shift in response to emerging regional and global challenges. Additionally, comparative studies examining how these dynamics play out in other regions could provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of this analytical framework. In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive examination of how the Arab Spring reshaped alignments between Türkiye and the Gulf Arab States, demonstrating the central role of ideational factors and regime security concerns in driving regional dynamics. By illuminating these complex relationships, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics in the post-Arab Spring era and provides a foundation for future scholarly inquiry in this field.

Ethics Committee approval was not required for this study.

The authors declare that the study was conducted in accordance with research and publication ethics.

The authors confirm that no part of the study was generated, either wholly or in part, using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools.

The authors declare that there are no financial conflicts of interest involving any institution, organization, or individual associated with this article. Additionally, there are no conflicts of interest among the authors.

The authors declare that they have equal contributions to the study.

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