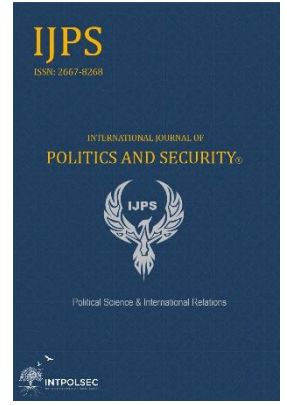


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Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait: Evaluating their Role in Regional Organizations and the Prospects for a Small State Security Cooperation Framework

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Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait: Evaluating their Role in Regional Organizations and the Prospects for a Small State Security Cooperation Framework

Konstantinos ZARRAS*

Abstract

Throughout the decade of the Arab Uprisings, the security environment of the broader Middle East area had altered essentially. The revolutionary wave that spread around North Africa and the Middle East, and the vigorous counter-revolutionary response it provoked, fuelled revolts, civil wars, and extra-regional interventions by global powers. As a result, the small Gulf States had to navigate through uncharted waters. IR scholarship has extensively explored the challenges and opportunities for small states within the changing international system. In particular, it is highlighted that membership in international organizations -regional and global- can increase their capacity for influence. Meanwhile, attention has recently been directed to the advantages that small states can derive from the establishment of security cooperation networks. This article's central aim is to provide an overview of the state of play regarding the policies of three small states in the Gulf: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. What are the obstacles that prevent them from deriving the most benefit from their participation in the regional organizations of the League of the Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council? For what reasons the prospect for the formation of a small Gulf States' security network is regarded as a distant possibility, despite the substantial gains that can be obtained for the three monarchies under consideration?

Keywords: *Gulf Security, International Organizations, Middle Eastern affairs, Regional Studies, Small States Studies.*

Katar, BAE ve Kuveyt: Küçük Devletlerin Güvenlik İşbirlikleri Çerçevesinde Bölgesel Örgütler İçindeki Rollerinin Değerlendirilmesi

Özet

Arap Ayaklanmalarının on yılı boyunca, geniş Orta Doğu bölgesinin güvenlik ortamı önemli bir şekilde değişti. Kuzey Afrika ve Orta Doğu'ya yayılan devrimci dalga ve kıskırttığı güçlü karşı-devrimci tepki, küresel güçlerin ayaklanmalara ve iç savaşlara bölge dışı müdahalelerini körükledi. Sonuç olarak, küçük Körfez Ülkeleri keşfedilmemiş sulara gezinmek zorunda kaldı. Uluslararası İlişkiler uzmanları, değişen uluslararası sistem içinde yer alan küçük devletlerin yüz yüze kaldıkları zorlukları ve fırsatları kapsamlı bir şekilde araştırmaktadırlar. Bu çalışmalar sonunda özellikle, bölgesel ve küresel düzeyde uluslararası kuruluşlara üye olmanın bu devletlerin etki kapasitelerini artırabileceği vurgulanmaktadır. Ayrıca, son zamanlarda görülen küçük devletlerin aralarında güvenlik işbirliği ağları kurmalarının sağlayacağı avantajlara dikkat çekilmektedir. Bu makalenin temel amacı, Körfez'deki üç küçük devletin (Katar, Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri ve Kuveyt) politikalarına ilişkin mevcut duruma genel bir bakış sağlamaktır. Bu kapsamda bu devletlerin Arap Devletleri Ligi ve Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi bölgesel örgütlerine katılımlarından en fazla faydayı elde etmelerini engelleyen engeller nelerdir? Söz konusu üç monarşi için elde edilebilecek önemli kazanımlara rağmen, küçük bir Körfez ülkeleri güvenlik ağının kurulması ihtimali hangi nedenlerle uzak bir olasılık olarak görülüyor? gibi soruları tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bölgesel Çalışmalar, Körfez Güvenliği, Küçük Devletler Çalışmaları, Orta Doğu, Uluslararası Örgütler.*

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1. Introduction

Over the greater part of the past century, International Relations (IR) scholars' emphasis was placed on the role of global powers in world affairs and, as a consequence, small states were neglected. The decolonization process and the dissolution of the Soviet Union that followed led to the proliferation of minor powers within the international system. Meanwhile, their importance increased and a number among them managed to actively participate in shaping global security dynamics. The gap in IR was then filled by various publications that shed light on the behavior of the less powerful.¹

One particular domain of small states' success in increasing their visibility is that of international organizations.² Through membership, they could make their voice heard and promote their national interests. The best examples can be found in Europe where small states, such as Denmark, have greatly profited from participation in the European Union and NATO institutional procedures.³ Moreover, a more recent trend in international affairs is the formation of less institutionalized security cooperation schemes between minor powers.⁴ Taking into account the above, one can assume that the small Gulf monarchies have the potential of exploiting their membership in regional organizations as well as creating a new security regime among them to maximize their influence.

The central aim of this study is to understand the extent to which participation of Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait in regional organizations contributed to the promotion of their interests and to explore the prospects for the creation of a novel small state security cooperation framework in the Gulf. The article has been structured into four parts. The first section draws on the Small State Studies sub-field of IR to classify the three countries under consideration as small states and examine their similarities and differences. In the second part, the focus

¹ Baker A. Fox, *The power of small states: diplomacy in World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Baldur Thorhallsson, "Studying small states: A review", *Small States & Territories I*, no.1 (2018): 17-34; Jeanne A.K. Hey (ed.), *Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003); Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl, Jessica Beyer (eds.), *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Baldur Thorhallsson, *The role of small states in the European Union* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Clive Archer, Alyson J.K. Bailes and Anders Wivel (eds.), *Small states and international security: Europe and beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Danica Panke, "Dwarfs in international negotiations: how small states make their voices heard", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25, no.3 (2012): 313-328.

³ Anders Wivel, Matthew Crandall, "Punching above their weight, but why? Explaining Denmark and Estonia in the transatlantic relationship", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 17, (2019): 392-419.

⁴ Aviad Rubin, Ehud Eiran, "Regional maritime security in the eastern Mediterranean: expectations and reality", *International Affairs* 95, no.5 (2019): 979-997.



turns on their respective foreign and security policies, within the changing strategic environment of the Middle East region. What guides their strategic choices and how important is threat perception? In what follows, the article attempts to investigate the role of the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait within two regional organizations which serve as case studies; the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The fourth and last part is dedicated to the prospects for the establishment of a small state security cooperation scheme in the Gulf. What are the motives and drivers for closer cooperation between the three Arab monarchies and why it appears, at least in a mid-term perspective, as a highly unlikely possibility?

2. Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE as the Small States within the International System

Throughout the 21st century, several small states emerged as influential actors by adopting smart strategies that helped them “punch above their weight”.⁵ Accordingly, the focus of Small States studies gradually shifted from the challenges associated with vulnerability to offered opportunities.⁶ Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait represent very interesting case studies for scholars. Their classification as small states allows us to embed them in a theoretical framework that could promote our understanding of their conduct in regional organizations as well as on the prospects for the development of a novel small state security cooperation scheme in the Gulf.

How do we measure smallness and why are the three countries under examination categorized as small states? There have been various definitions depending on different sets of criteria in each case. Population size has been the most common variable for conceptualizing the small state. But fixing the population threshold is an arbitrary action and, respectively, the given numbers vary from less than 15 million to less than 1.5 million.⁷ In any case, the Gulf states under consideration fit all categories if we take into account the number of citizens having full citizenship.⁸ Beyond population, multiple factors can be assessed. Thorhallsson’s framework of six sets of criteria includes most of the variables that

⁵ Diana Panke, *Small States in the European Union: Coping with Structural Disadvantages* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

⁶ Baldur Thorhallsson, “Studying Small States: A Review”, *Small States and Territories 1*, no.1 (2018): 17.

⁷ Sverrir Steinsson, Baldur Thorhallsson, “Small State Foreign Policy”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 2-4.

⁸ The estimation about their number is about 1.2 million in Kuwait and the UAE and approximately 350 thousands in Qatar. Data retrieved from:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.TOTL?locations=AE-QA-KW>



have been used: *fixed size* (population and geographical size), *sovereignty size* (the degree to which a state controls its internal affairs), *political size* (military and administrative capabilities, internal cohesion), *economic size* (GDP, development), *perceptual size* (if a state perceives itself or is perceived by external actors as small) and *preference size* (the mindset and priorities of the decision-making elite).⁹ The inclusion of both objective and subjective measurements renders the determination of small states a very delicate and difficult task.

The relational definition of small states is a more flexible approach that allows us to overcome the difficulties of threshold fixing. According to this perspective, the defining feature of small states is their inherent power deficit vis-a-vis other states. Therefore, they are viewed as significantly inferior to global powers and modestly inferior to middle powers¹⁰, regarding their capacities and influence. Along the continuum of power, they occupy a position closer to the weakness pole and are defined as “the weak part in an asymmetric relationship”.¹¹ According to Rickli, “A small state has limited power in its relation to others due to its limited ability to mobilize resources which can be material, relational or normative”.¹² The UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar are considered inferior to global and regional powers. Despite their economic capabilities, factors like manpower shortage impede them from upgrading their position within the hierarchy of power. Hence, they are included in the small state category.

As a consequence, global and regional powers are determining the conditions under which the three states have to operate. Structural constraints weigh heavily on their decisions and reduce foreign and security policy options. But is this inherent deficit of power condemning them to have only a marginal role in regional affairs? The answer depends on the particular strategic environment and the “specific Spatio-temporal context”¹³. As will be highlighted in the following parts of this article about the case studies, the alteration of the Middle Eastern strategic environment after the Arab Uprisings has provided them with

⁹ Baldur Thorhallsson, “The Size of States in the European Union, Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives”, *European Integration* 28, no.1 (2006): 8.

¹⁰ Sverrir Steinsson, Baldur Thorhallsson, “Small State Foreign Policy”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 3.

¹¹ Robert Steinmetz, Anders Wivel (eds), *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010): 6.

¹² Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli (eds), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2016): 12.

¹³ Baldur Thorhallsson, Anders Wivel, “Small States in the European Union: What Do We Know and What Would We Like to Know?”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no.4 (2006): 654.



opportunities and incentives to expand their influence. The power vacuums that were created because of the collapse of the political order in certain areas in combination with the reduced involvement of external global powers such as the United States, opened the path for the implementation of assertive policies, in particular for the UAE and Qatar.

Being a small state at the global level does not necessarily result in political marginalization and reactive policies. Some among them are attempting to apply smart strategies and exploit wisely their resources to safeguard autonomy and expand influence. Status-seeking strategies for example can lead to the recognition of small states by more powerful actors as useful partners.¹⁴ Small states may compensate for their aggregate structural power disadvantage with greater issue-specific power and the development of niche capabilities. Smart strategies imply that they take initiatives within the context of interstate relations or international organizations to maximize their impact on political outcomes.¹⁵ With respect to this issue, the focus should turn on the role of leadership whose smart decisions may help overcome the limitations of power status and assets of a specific country.¹⁶ In the cases of the UAE and Qatar, the role of leadership cannot be underestimated as it constitutes a crucial factor in the decision-making and policy implementation processes.

Which are the similarities and distinctive features of the three small monarchies under examination? To begin with, these resource-rich countries have vast economic capabilities. Situated in the Gulf region, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait share common features and face similar challenges for their security. Their unique political structures are the product of an unusual common state-formation process that was conditioned by the political domination of Great Britain in the area until the late 1960s.¹⁷ The three relatively recently established states managed to survive -contrary to the predictions of certain analysts of the time¹⁸- despite their weaknesses. On different occasions, they used their economic power to diffuse domestic

¹⁴ Revecca Pedi, Ilias Kouskouvelis, "Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Small State Seeking for Status", in *The New Eastern Mediterranean*, eds., Spyridon N. Litsas, Aristotelis Tziampiris (Cham: Springer International, 2019):152

¹⁵ Revecca Pedi, Katerina Sarri, "From the 'Small but Smart State' to the 'Small and Entrepreneurial State': introducing a framework for Effective Small State Strategies within the EU and Beyond", *Baltic Journal of European Studies* 9, no.1 (2019): 7

¹⁶ Ilias Kouskouvelis, "'Smart' Leadership in a Small State: The Case of Cyprus", in *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Power and Politics*, eds. Spyridon Litsas, Aristotelis Tziampiris, (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2015).

¹⁷ James Onley, "Britain and the Gulf Sheikdoms, 1820-1971: The Politics of Protection", *Occasional Paper No.4*, Georgetown School of Foreign Service in Qatar, (2009).



tensions and to solidify their ties with external powers that served as guarantors for their security. But, the gift of natural resource endowment was also considered as an obstacle for the modernization of society and the development of national identity among the citizens. Traditional and tribal dynamics are still very influential throughout the Gulf societies. During the last decades, the three states have made considerable progress regarding their internal balancing, the consolidation of national identity, and the implementation of proactive policies. Manpower shortage remains, however, the biggest obstacle for the application of ambitious strategies.

Besides their obvious similarities, we have to underline certain differences between the Gulf monarchies. Concerning their political system, for example, Kuwait is the most liberal and institutionally developed country in the Gulf, with a relatively powerful parliament that allows a greater degree of political participation.¹⁹ On the other side, it can be argued that the decision-making process in Qatar and the UAE is more dependent on leadership that can exercise more effective governance. Moreover, it should be noted that the UAE is a federation of seven emirates, where Abu Dhabi is considered as the leading constituent unit and Dubai has a crucial position as well. Another differentiating factor is that the UAE and Qatar have developed their non-energy sectors and have more influence in the international arena concerning their northern neighbor.

To sum up, the three Gulf monarchies are qualified as small states because of their relatively reduced capabilities vis-a-vis global and regional powers. Their primary aim is to ensure their survival and autonomy. The leaders of these states realized their inability to pursue their policy goals relying solely on their resources. The constraints of the global and regional environment give them a narrow range of action and as a consequence, they depend on alliances and cooperation with other states. However, as mentioned above, even though small states are positioned closer to the weakness pole along the power spectrum, they are in a far better position than weak or fragile states. Under the current circumstances in the wider Middle East area, they have found room for maneuvers to expand their strategic footprint throughout the region.

¹⁸ Hillel Frisch, "Why Monarchies Persist: Balancing between Internal and External Vulnerability", *Review of International Studies* 37, no.1 (2011): 167–84.

¹⁹ Michael Herb, "The Origins of Kuwait's National Assembly", *LSE Kuwait Programme Paper Series*, no. 38 (2016).



3. Foreign and Security Policies of the three Small Gulf States

The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait fulfill the defining criteria of small states in the international system. This means that the deficit of capabilities vis-a-vis more powerful actors determines their foreign and security policy options. Therefore, structural dynamics shape the strategic environment within which they operate, and to secure their existence, they “must tailor their policies to the threats and opportunities it provides”.²⁰ So, which are those actors setting the scene of regional competition for influence in the wider Middle East area? We can identify two categories: a) Middle Eastern states aspiring to become regional hegemony and b) extra-regional powers that heavily penetrate the subsystem and interfere in its affairs. To grasp the current security dynamics in the Middle East, one has to reflect on the contemporary history of the region.

Arab powers have struggled to achieve hegemony since the establishment of the Middle East as a states-system in 1948. During the first decades of its existence as a modern state, Egypt had been the most powerful actor of the region. Under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Cairo attempted to politically dominate the Arab world by using Pan-Arabism as an ideological weapon. Saudi Arabia was among the most significant opponents of Egypt and managed to counter the pan-Arab wave which threatened to unsettle the monarchical order.²¹ Under the conditions surrounding the Arab Cold War,²² and in particular, after the withdrawal of Great Britain from the Gulf, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE were confronted with the challenges of pan-Arabism as well. Since their independence, the three states stood behind Saudi Arabia and positioned themselves firmly in the pro-Western camp. However, they didn't cut ties with the so-called revolutionary camp but attempted to placate them mainly by providing financial assistance to the actors that were at the forefront of the conflict with Israel.

At the time when Qatar and the UAE declared full independence in 1971 (Kuwait was the first emirate to achieve independence in 1961), the pan-Arabist movement was already on the decline. It appeared that the most severe threats were coming from neighboring countries

²⁰ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

²¹ Gregory Gause, “The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia”, in Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014).

²² Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War 1958–1964. A Study of Ideology in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).



that were more powerful than the newly established monarchies. Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia were competing for influence in the Gulf and they had territorial claims over their weaker neighbors. The UAE realized very early their vulnerability when Iran seized the islands of Abu Musa, and the Greater and Lesser Tunb just two days before their declaration of independence.²³ Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have had to compete for territorial claims as well²⁴, with Saudi Arabia also giving support to Bahrain in its border dispute with Qatar. Regarding Kuwait, the long-standing claim by Iraq over all the territory of the State, which was perceived by Baghdad as the 19th province of Iraq, led to the invasion of 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War.²⁵

The second group of actors that significantly influenced the strategic environment of the Gulf area consists of external global powers who were heavily involved in regional politics. Great Britain had played the leading role in the Gulf region, as it was the most critical factor for the state formation process that led to the establishment of the small Gulf monarchies. After its strategic withdrawal from the area that began in 1968,²⁶ the United States replaced Britain and emerged as the key actor in the formation of security dynamics. Maintaining the regional balance and safeguarding stability had become one of the main US aims throughout the decades that followed. The area was vital for Washington's interests not only because of its critical importance for energy security but within the context of the bipolar antagonism with the Soviet Union as well.

Therefore, under the circumstances that were shaped by regional and global powers, the three Gulf States had to adapt and apply suitable policies to maintain their autonomy and increase, if possible, their influence. We can identify two main sources of common threats for the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait: a) The first source is found, as mentioned above, in the neighboring states of Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Security concerns of small states are

²³ Simon Henderson, "The Persian Gulf's 'Occupied Territory': The Three-Island Dispute", *Policywatch 1402*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-persian-gulfs-occupied-territory-the-three-island-dispute>.

²⁴ Noura Al Mazrouei, "The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Arabia Border Dispute in the 21st Century", *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no.2 (2017): 157-172.

²⁵ Habibur Rahman, *The Making of the Gulf War: Origins of Kuwait's Long-Standing Territorial Dispute with Iraq* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1997).

²⁶ Simon Smith, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A Pattern Not a Puzzle", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44, no.2 (2016): 328-351.



primarily defined by neighboring states rather than the more distant ones.²⁷ b) The second is linked with trans-national regional movements with anti-monarchical ideological elements that threaten the regimes and the very own existence of the states. Those movements were associated mainly with Arab nationalism in the past and Islamism during the more recent decades. These two sources of threats can be combined, as more powerful states can employ non-state actors to destabilize weaker states. So, how did they adapt to this security environment?

To minimize or compensate for their power deficit, the three concerned actors have, according to Rickli²⁸, three foreign and security policy options: a) maximizing their influence by joining an alliance and allying with (*band-wagoning*) or against threats (*balancing*), b) protecting their autonomy by adopting a defensive strategy -translated as the application of a *neutrality* policy- and c) adopting a *hedging* strategy, meaning to bandwagon with a regional power while balancing at the same time against the latter through a bilateral alliance with great power at the global level. At present, the foreign and security policies of the Gulf monarchies appear to reflect the strategic option of hedging. Their common characteristic is that the bilateral strategic relationship with the US comes out as the cornerstone for their overall strategies. However, this is only one aspect in their complicated alliance frameworks and their differing approaches in regional affairs constitute a serious obstacle for the coordination of their policies.

The adoption of hedging strategies took place during the 1990s and these decisions were the product of two significant regional developments that preceded: the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Iranian Revolution was perceived as menacing by the three states because a revolutionary and anti-monarchical movement would thenceforth be supported by a powerful state. The Arab Gulf monarchies reacted by establishing the regional organization of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that comprised the five small Arab states of the Gulf plus Saudi Arabia. Even though the newly formed regional organization wasn't a formal alliance, the purpose behind its creation has been the containment of the Iranian threat and the promotion of security of its members. Nevertheless, the GCC proved incapable of protecting its members, when the troops of

²⁷ Benjamin Miller, "When and How Regions Become Peaceful: Potential Theoretical Pathways to Peace", *International Studies Review*, no.7 (2005): 241.



Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. This was a watershed moment in the history of the Gulf states and the decision-making elites of the small monarchies realized their weakness and vulnerability facing their more powerful neighbors. What followed was the signing of bilateral strategic partnership agreements with Washington. These bilateral agreements function ever since as the ultimate guarantee for Kuwait's, Qatar's, and the UAE's security. Even though the three states have followed different paths in their regional policies and in the case of Qatar and the UAE they came to confront each other, the pillar of their policies has been the maintenance of their strategic relationship with the US.

To sum up, in the volatile strategic environment of the Gulf, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait pursued multiple policy options to safeguard their autonomy and expand their influence. Their choice of joining the Gulf Cooperation Council is interpreted as a balancing act against revolutionary Iran after 1979. At the same time, it can be viewed as a band-wagoning policy towards Saudi Arabia, which also poses threats for the three small states. The complex alliance framework is completed by the bilateral strategic partnership agreements with the United States which can protect their sovereignty and independence from Saudi Arabia's interference. This hedging strategy seeks to offset risks in a situation of high uncertainties and allows a small state to remain well-positioned regardless of future developments.

This basic strategic orientation is still defining the foreign and security policies of Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait even though during the last years and especially after the eruption of the Arab Uprisings in December 2010, their regional policies diverge and often contradict each other. As Kuwait seems to continue its previous policy orientation, giving priority to the maintenance of balance and seeking to play a mediating role in regional conflicts, the UAE and Qatar have taken an assertive turn and they increased their presence and interference in Middle Eastern international politics. Their proactive and activist policies do not question or contest their bilateral ties with Washington. The two states are working to expand their influence and control developments within the margins of maneuvers that are allowed by US priorities.²⁹

²⁸ Jean-Marc Rickli, "New Alliances Dynamics in the Gulf and their Impact on the Small GCC States", *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1, no.1 (2006):132-150.

²⁹ Rory Miller and Harry Verhoeven, "Overcoming smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and strategic realignment in the Gulf", *International Politics* 57, (2020): 1-20; Hussein Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National*



The Arab Uprisings' phenomenon has caused the collapse of long-standing regimes and created power vacuums throughout the Middle East. At the same time, the stance of the Obama administration towards the ouster of its former allies, such as Mubarak in Egypt, has sent shockwaves to the Arab monarchies. The perception of a US disengagement from the Middle East, as a part of a more general pivot to Asia, has pushed the pro-Western Arab states to take the necessary measures and get prepared for a post-American era in the region. Qatar and the UAE, two small but economically powerful actors decided not to stand idle to developments but to actively engage and influence developments on the ground. At the same time, it should be highlighted that they are both careful not to upset their relationship with Washington. The conclusion is that while Kuwait continues its cautious policies, Qatar and the UAE compete to promote their agendas in areas where the US strategic interest is reduced. The next part of this article will investigate the conduct and role of the three Gulf monarchies within the two most important regional institutions: the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

4. The Small Gulf States' Role in Regional Organizations: League of the Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council

After examining the central aspects of the Gulf monarchies' foreign and security policies, the attention will turn on their respective roles in Middle Eastern regional institutions. In particular, I will look into their participation in institutional procedures and mechanisms of the League of Arab States (Arab League) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These two regional organizations represent the most important institutions for the exploration of Emirati, Qatari, and Kuwaiti diplomatic activity in the Middle East during the last decades.

Active participation in international and regional institutions is considered of high importance by the leadership of small states because they can serve as fields for influence expansion. As Steinsson and Thorhallsson argue "small states show a preference for multilateral organizations because they reduce power asymmetry between states, decrease the transaction costs of diplomacy and impose constraints on larger states".³⁰ Membership and participation in the procedures and high-level meetings of international institutions provide them with opportunities to make their voice heard and have a disproportionately higher

Security Strategy, The Arab Gulf States Institute, Washington DC, (2017), https://agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/UAE-Security_ONLINE-2.pdf.

³⁰ Sverrir Steinsson and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Small State Foreign Policy", in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 1.



impact on political developments. This is true concerning the organizations of the Euro-Atlantic region, where there are many cases of successful small state diplomacy. In this highly institutionalized area, lesser powers can take advantage of their membership in organizations such as the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to upgrade their position in the regional system. Summit meetings can become fields for the application of niche capabilities within the framework of smart strategies.³¹ In the Middle Eastern context, it could be assumed that Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE could exploit Arab League and GCC high-level meetings to increase their visibility and upgrade their status.

Even though the three small states under consideration have developed niche capabilities in domains such as conflict prevention or sustainable development, it seems like the benefits deriving from their participation in the GCC and Arab League organizations are not as important as expected. Within a weak institutional framework, it is extremely difficult to create leverage effects, in contrast to the cases of small European states in the EU. As a consequence, the Arab League's and GCC's impact on the formation of international and regional political outcomes is marginal in comparison with other institutions.³²

The League of Arab States

Taking into consideration the weakness of institutional mechanisms of the two regional organizations, I will explore the positioning, stances, and initiatives of the three small Gulf states within them. Concerning the League of Arab States, it should be highlighted that large membership (22 member-states) and its wide area of interest which extends beyond the Middle East have a negative impact on the organizations' effectiveness.³³ Moreover, the unanimity policy has prevented the organization from voting resolutions that would have serious effects on security issues. Those limitations have reduced the room for maneuver of the concerned countries. On top of that, regional powers of the Middle East have in different instances attempted to use the organization as a vehicle for the expansion of their influence.

³¹ Revecca PEDI, Katerina Sarri, "From the 'Small but Smart State' to the 'Small and Entrepreneurial State': introducing a framework for Effective Small State Strategies within the EU and Beyond", *Baltic Journal of European Studies* 9, no.1 (2019).

³² Paul Aarts, "The Middle East: a region without regionalism or the end of exceptionalism?", *Third World Quarterly* 20, no.5 (1999): 911–925.

³³ Marco Pinfari, "Nothing but failure? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council as Mediators in Middle Eastern Conflicts", Working Paper no. 45, Crisis States Working Papers Series no 2, LSE, (2009), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrf-working-papers-phase-two/wp45.2-nothing-but-failure.pdf>.



Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia have tried, without great success, to control the function of the Arab League to achieve political domination over the Arab world.

Kuwait joined the Arab League in 1961, while the UAE and Qatar were accepted ten years later. Given their vulnerability, the small Gulf monarchies have sidelined with the more powerful states during the Arab League summits. This policy pattern helped the monarchical regimes to increase their legitimacy both at the domestic and the regional level because they appeared as integrated members of the family of Arab states, supporters of the Palestinians, and protectors of the *status quo*. The Palestinian issue dominated the debates during the Summits that took place in different Arab capitals from 1964 in Cairo to 1990 in Baghdad.³⁴ Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar not only expressed their solidarity with the Palestinians but provided substantial financial support to them and to the Arab states that were at the frontline of the conflict with Israel. This policy choice aimed at decreasing pressure from the neighboring countries and establishing them as integral parts of the Arab front.

The 6th Arab League Summit that took place in Algiers in 1973, just after the Yom Kippur War, was the first where all three states participated. During the high-level meeting, they all expressed solidarity to Egypt, Syria, and the Palestinians.³⁵ At the next summit, one year later in Rabat, the Arab states went one step further, by recognizing the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. In general, the small Gulf states followed Saudi Arabia's positions during other summits of the Arab League. The shortcomings and incapacity of the organization to provide solutions and play a more influential role in regional and international affairs came to the surface after the invasion of the Iraqi army to Kuwait in 1990. It was a clear violation of the charter of the Arab League, which forbade any member country from using force against another member. At an emergency meeting in Cairo, at the beginning of August 1990, the conference condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and demanded "an immediate, unconditional and complete withdrawal of Iraqi troops from that country".³⁶ Nevertheless, it became clear that the Arab League could not protect the sovereignty of its members, and Kuwait, along with Qatar and the UAE, turned towards the

³⁴ Farah Dakhllallah, "The League of Arab States and Regional Security: Towards an Arab Security Community?", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no.3 (2012).

³⁵ Rex Brynen, Palestine and the Arab State System: Permeability, State Consolidation and the Intifada, *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 24, no.3 (1991): 595-621.

³⁶ Niyazi Gunay, "Arab League Summit Conferences, 1964-2000", *Policywatch* 496, The Washington Institute, 2000, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-league-summit-conferences-19642000>.



US and the West to find shelter. The next Arab League summit took place six years later, without Iraq. In general, the participation of the three Gulf states in the Arab League summits reflected the cautious approach in their regional policies until the beginning of the Arab Uprisings.

The Arab Revolts forced the states of the region to adapt to the new situation and led temporarily to a revived role for the Arab League. The League of Arab States came to the fore by suspending Libya's membership in the organization and by being actively involved in the imposition of a no-fly zone in the country.³⁷ Moreover, it decided on the suspension of Syria's membership, as well as on the imposition of economic and political sanctions on the Assad regime. Nevertheless, as the uprisings evolved into armed insurrections and civil wars the members of the organization disagreed on several issues and the League returned to its marginal role. As regards Qatar and the UAE, they were both involved in the procedures within the Arab League Summit and actively participated in the military operations against the Gaddafi regime. However, the overthrow of Gaddafi has been one of the last instances where Doha and Abu Dhabi were found on the same side. After his ouster, the two dynamic monarchies started to compete not only in the Libyan arena by supporting the opposing sides of the subsequent civil war, but in other fields as well.

The Gulf Cooperation Council

From a small state policy perspective, it can be argued that the organization of the Gulf Cooperation Council could offer more opportunities to Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE to gain leverage in regional security dynamics. The small membership of the GCC and the fact that five among the six members are classified as small states provide them with advantages in the decision-making process. Nonetheless, the two main shortcomings of the Arab League can be found in the GCC as well. The first is the very slow progress regarding the enhancement of the institutional framework and the second is the role of Saudi Arabia, which as an aspiring regional hegemon has attempted to dominate over the institution and impose its policy choices on the small Gulf monarchies. Throughout its forty years of functioning, the GCC has had some successes in the economic, legal, and security realm but failed to complete its most aspiring projects.³⁸ Contrary to its very ambitious goals and declarations, from the

³⁷Kjell Engelbrekt, *High-Table Diplomacy, The Reshaping of International Security Institutions*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016): 93.

³⁸ Christian Koch, "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization," *KAS International Reports* (2010): 27-29.



adoption of a common currency to the realization of regional integration and the establishment of a Gulf Union, the GCC displays poor results. Established in 1981, as a reply to the Iranian Revolution, the GCC's primary aim was to provide security to its members. But, as in the case of the Arab League, the Iraqi army's attack against Kuwait in 1990 revealed the incapacity of the regional security framework.

The strategic choice of the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait to join the GCC in 1981 can be interpreted as a balancing act against Iran. Even though Iraq and Saudi Arabia were also contesting their autonomy and territorial integrity, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has upgraded the Iranian threat and weighed in their decision.³⁹ But at the same time, the three small state actors tried to maintain their freedom of action vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. Their positioning can partly explain the failure of the regional organization in 1990 to protect one of its members. The collective military mechanism of the Peninsula Shield force, which was established in 1984, has had zero effect on the Gulf conflict. The Peninsula Shield's incapacity lies partly in the small Gulf monarchies' policy of not providing it with what was needed to become a considerable military force. This can be considered as one aspect of the hedging strategy of the three actors under consideration. After the Gulf War, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE have upgraded their strategic relationship with the US by signing bilateral strategic partnership agreements. Washington signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Kuwait in 1991, Qatar in 1992, and the UAE in 1994.⁴⁰ As indicated in the previous part, this choice is regarded as the cornerstone of their overall security policy. A close relationship with Washington serves as a guaranty for the preservation of their autonomy vis-a-vis the two remaining regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

After it failed in the 1990s, the GCC seemed to gain prominence in the event of the Arab revolts. The uprising in Bahrain has been the most severe threat for an Arab monarchy during this period. The Peninsula Shield Force was activated and troops and police officers from Saudi Arabia and the UAE were sent to quell the insurgency after the invitation of the al-Khalifas. The operation was successful in ending the turmoil and protecting the ruling

³⁹ Gregory F. Gause, "Threats and Threat Perception in the Persian Gulf Region", *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2, (2007):119-124.

⁴⁰See Committee on Foreign Relations, "The Gulf security architecture: partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council", a majority staff report prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, second session, (2012), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-112SPRT74603/html/CPRT-112SPRT74603.html>



family of the Kingdom.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the Arab monarchies did not have the same approach on several other regional issues. Even the relations between Saudi Arabia and UAE are not always as harmonious as they are portrayed. Above all, Riyadh prioritizes its struggle against the Islamic Republic of Iran while Abu Dhabi pursues its security agenda.

After the enthronement of King Salman in 2015 and the rise to power of his son Mohammed bin Salman, Riyadh stepped up its efforts to dominate the GCC. The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen has caught many by surprise. All members of the GCC have initially given their consent for the operation, but through time they started to express reservations. Mohammed bin Salman's assertive leadership and foreign decision-making without consulting his partners, has made the prospect of the evolution of the GCC to a union of equal members seem like a distant occasion. The small member states have cautiously objected to Saudi attempts to promote regional integration which was interpreted as an attempt for establishing a Saudi hegemony over the Arabian Peninsula.

To sum up, within the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council the three small Gulf states have had limited opportunities to apply smart policies to extract leverage. The main reasons behind this assertion are the organizations' lack of efficiency and, in particular in the case of the GCC, the willingness of the small monarchies to counter the Saudi hegemonic aspirations. In the following section, the article examines the prospect for the creation of a new security cooperation framework that could involve only small states. Given the fact that the small Gulf states share many common characteristics and deal with similar threats, it can be expected that they could join their forces to upgrade their position in the regional setting.

5. An Assessment of the Prospects for Establishing a Regional Security Cooperation Framework in The Gulf

As previously argued, the weak institutional environment of the Middle East area in addition to a highly conflictual strategic setting, impede Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait from taking advantage of their membership in the existing regional organizations (LAS and GCC) to secure their autonomy and expand their influence. Meanwhile, we have witnessed the development of less institutionalized security cooperation networks by lesser powers in other regions, such as the Baltic and Nordic areas, or the Eastern Mediterranean during the last

⁴¹ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain, What one Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran, *World Affairs*



years.⁴² So, what prevents the collective actors under consideration from establishing a new small state security institution in the Gulf? After presenting the unifying and divisive factors, the article will conclude by examining the current state of play through the prism of the Neoclassical Realist approach.

Given the fact that the small Gulf monarchies have to deal with similar challenges regarding their security, it can be stressed that the conditions seem favorable for the enhancement of their cooperation. As has already been mentioned, after the collapse of the Iraqi regime in 2003, the hegemonic ambitions of Tehran -and to a lesser extent of Riyadh- constitute the principal concern for their leaders. Security threats also emanate from transnational Islamist movements which vary from the Jihadist-Salafist current to moderate political Islam groups. The revolutionary wave of the Arab revolts has aggravated the threats that the regimes are facing. So far, they managed to defuse domestic tensions and avoided any serious internal order disruption. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of Uprisings is ongoing and no one can predict its outcome. Apart from these significant regional challenges, there is another central issue that weighs heavily in the domestic security debates. This is the case of the US inaction vis-a-vis the developments that provoked regime changes in countries that were considered as Washington's allies. The perceived US disengagement from the Middle East, within the more general framework of its "pivot to Asia,"⁴³ has pushed the Arab Gulf monarchies to reconsider their regional policies and become proactive and more assertive.

Under these circumstances, the formation of a novel cooperation network between Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Kuwait city could offer many advantages to all parts:

a) By establishing a united front their combined military capabilities would increase and, therefore, the more powerful neighbors would be dissuaded from contesting their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

b) Given that the three small states have significant economic capabilities, the coordination of their policies in the fields of energy, foreign aid, humanitarian assistance, and

174, no.6 (2012): 74-84

⁴² Anders Wivel, Matthew Crandall, "Punching above their weight, but why? Explaining Denmark and Estonia in the transatlantic relationship", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 17, (2019): 392-419; Anders Wivel, "Theory and Prospects for Northern Europe's Small States", *Cooperation and Conflict* 35, no.3 (2000): 331-340; Jeremy Lamoreaux and David Galbreath, "The Baltic States As 'Small States': Negotiating The 'East' By Engaging The 'West'", *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no.1 (2008): 1-14.



targeted investments will make them even more influential in the regional and global economy.

c) Acting as a bloc could render them a more attractive partner for the US and the emerging global powers.

The above-mentioned assertions indicate that the establishment of a small state tripartite partnership in the Gulf (with the possible inclusion of Oman and Bahrain) could be considered as an optimal strategic choice. However, during the last years, disagreements between the three monarchies have come to the forefront. Moreover, Qatar and the UAE have become regional antagonists and it seems unlikely under the current circumstances to overcome their differences. The contradicting security approaches of Doha and Abu Dhabi became visible after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and the rise of Mohamed Morsi to power in Egypt. Their dispute culminated in June 2017 to the so-called Gulf Crisis, after the decision of the UAE -along with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain- to impose a blockade over Qatar. The two small Gulf states were found in opposite camps on several fronts, from Egypt and Libya to Sudan, Somalia, and Syria.⁴⁴ With regard to Kuwait, it has taken initiatives and made much effort to mediate and resolve the intra-regional dispute.⁴⁵ After its isolation from the neighboring Gulf monarchies, Qatar did not succumb to pressures but instead decided to reinforce its ties with Turkey and, at a lower degree, with Iran. This policy choice has further exacerbated tensions, as Abu Dhabi perceives the entry of Turkey in Gulf security affairs as menacing.

So, how can we interpret the rift between the small Gulf states given that systemic pressures from the global and the regional level should in principle push them towards cooperation and alliance formation? Neoclassical Realism can provide us with some insights into this question.⁴⁶ The analysis of intervening variables that lie between systemic constraints and the implementation of foreign and security policy can prove very helpful to identify the reasons behind the Qatari-Emirati rift. First, it is the perception of leadership that

⁴³ Jordi Quero and Andrea Dessi, "Unpredictability in US foreign policy and the regional order in the Middle East: reacting vis-à-vis a volatile external security-provider", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (2019).

⁴⁴ Rory Miller, Harry Verhoeven, "Overcoming smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and strategic realignment in the Gulf", *International Politics* 57, (2020): 1-20.

⁴⁵ Abdulhadi Alajmi, "The Gulf Crisis: An Insight Into Kuwait's Mediation Efforts", *International Relations and Diplomacy* 6, no.10 (2018): 537-548.

⁴⁶ Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro, Steven Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).



constitutes a major factor in the decision-making process of the Gulf states.⁴⁷ Taking into consideration that government institutions are weaker, especially in Qatar and the UAE, the personality of the leader and his set of ideas is disproportionately important for policy orientation.

In the case of Abu Dhabi, the de facto leader of the federation, Mohamed bin Zayed, portrays Islamist organizations and in particular the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood as a vital threat for the Emirati regime. On the contrary, the branch of the al-Thani family that took over the control of Qatar after 1995, maintains a positive relationship with the Muslim Brothers and uses it as leverage to upgrade its status in the Arab and Muslim world. The leadership's image can affect the perception of the systemic stimuli. Since the impact of leaders on the decision-making process in both the UAE and Qatar is very significant, we can understand why the conflicting views of Mohammed bin Zayed and Tamim bin Hamad over the role of the Ikhwan organization and the general security dynamics in the Middle East, are translated into competing for regional policies. Regarding Kuwait, it has taken a more balanced approach; even though the government decided to take measures against members of Muslim Brothers-linked groups in the country, it remains more flexible and cautious.

An additional factor that determined the escalation of tensions between the UAE and Qatar is associated with another intervening variable, domestic institutional mechanisms.⁴⁸ Until 2008, the Emirati federation's foreign policy has been less assertive because the emirate of Dubai did not consent to Abu Dhabi's dynamic approach in regional affairs. Dubai maintained closer relations with Iran and it was functioning as a balancer for the UAE. After 2008, however, a severe economic crisis has put Dubai in a precarious position. The crucial intervention of Abu Dhabi, which provided its neighbor with the necessary credentials to avoid bankruptcy, has altered the intra-Emirate balance of power. In exchange for its aid, Abu Dhabi was given the green light to promote its agenda in the federations' foreign and security policies.⁴⁹ This factor, which is linked to the domestic state of play, had a major impact on the decision-making process and the consequent confrontational approach to Qatar.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 61-66.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 75-78.

⁴⁹ David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring", *The Middle East Journal* 71, no.4 (2017): 552.



6. Conclusion

In the volatile and highly conflictual strategic environment of the broader Middle East, the states of the region have to navigate through uncharted waters. Even though the small Gulf monarchies of the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait have succeeded so far to cope with the posed challenges, they still face critical threats. Under these circumstances, they would greatly benefit from coordinating their policies within regional organizations as well as from establishing a new small state security cooperation framework. Contrary to that, it is evident that they implement incompatible and often confronting foreign and security policies. This article examined why there are severe limitations to their capacity of gaining leverage through participation in the League of the Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The two main reasons can be found in the weak institutional framework of the two organizations as well as in the constant attempts by regional powers to dominate and impose their will upon the weaker members. Concerning the second main question, it appears that the prospect for the establishment of a future institutional security set-up by the three small states of the Gulf is weak, at least in the mid-term. Despite the common challenges and threats that they face and the obvious advantages that they could acquire by joining their forces, the divergent threat perception between Doha and Abu Dhabi and their conflicting policies on numerous fronts are regarded as an insurmountable obstacle.

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