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The Securitization in the Persian Gulf and Its Changing Dynamics

Basra Körfezi'nde Güvenlikleştirme ve Değişen Dinamikleri

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Abstract

The Persian Gulf has a very strategic importance in international politics because of its vast hydrocarbon energy resources and very strategic location as a transition point for international oil flow and trade. Therefore, regional security is a very significant issue not only in regional politics but also in global politics. However, the regional security map has not been designed by the regional actors and based on their own security interests and objectives but rather by global powers and based on their hegemonic interests and objectives. Since the end of the Second World War, in parallel with the Gulf States' increasing importance based on their increasing oil-exporting and financial capacities, controlling regional security has become a very significant matter for the US-led Western hegemony. To control and design the security of the Persian Gulf, the US-led Western alliance established a security system in the region through cooperation with the regional allies, in different phases through the periods of changing regional geopolitics in each decade. The main argument of this article is that in the framework of this security system, the Gulf has been exposed to a constant securitization constructed based on politically defined security threats by the US policies at the expense of the regional stability and security and maintained through the armament of the Gulf States and military involvement of outsider powers. In the recent phase of the securitization in the "post-Counter Revolution" context, significant changes have emerged with the dynamics and the power balances of the regional security. This article aims to define these changes that challenge the Western-designed regional security architecture and to examine potency of the developments to result in desecuritization and normalization in long-term toward the stability of the region.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, Security, Securitization, Middle East

Özet

Basra Körfezi, sahip olduğu devasa hidrokarbon enerji kaynakları ve uluslararası petrol akışının ve ticaretin çok önemli bir geçiş noktası olan stratejik konumu sebebi ile uluslararası politikada çok stratejik bir öneme sahiptir. Bu nedenle bölgenin güvenliği yalnızca bölgesel siyasette değil, küresel siyasette de çok önemli bir konudur. Ancak, bölgesel güvenlik haritası, bölgesel aktörler tarafından ve kendi güvenlik çıkarları ve hedefleri esas alınarak değil, küresel güçler tarafından ve onların hegemonik çıkarları ve hedefleri doğrultusunda dizayn edilmektedir. İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın sona ermesinden bu yana, Körfez ülkelerinin artan petrol ihraç ve finansal kapasitelerine bağlı olarak artan önemine paralel olarak, bölgesel güvenliğin kontrolü, ABD liderliğindeki Batı hegemonyası için çok önemli hale gelmiştir. ABD liderliğindeki Batı ittifakı, Basra Körfezi'nin güvenliğini mimarisini dizayn ve kontrol etmek için bölgesel jeopolitiğin değişme gösterdiği her on yıllık periyodlarda, bölgesel müttefiklerle işbirliği yaparak bölgede bir güvenlik sistemi kurmuştur. Bu makalenin ana argümanı, söz konusu güvenlik sistemi çerçevesinde Körfez'in, bölgesel güvenlik ve istikrar pahasına ABD politikaları tarafından siyasi olarak belirlenen tehdit tanımlamalarına dayalı olarak inşa edilen ve Körfez ülkelerinin silahlandırılması ve dış güçlerin askeri müdahalesi yoluyla sürdürülen sürekli bir güvenlikleştirmeye maruz kalmakta olduğudur. Güvenlikleştirmenin halen devam eden son aşamasında Arap Baharı karşı devrimi sonrası bağlamda, bölgesel güvenliğin dinamiklerinde ve bölgesel güç

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dengelerinde önemli deęişimler ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu makale, Batı tarafından dizayn edilmiş bölgesel güvenlik mimarisine meydan okuyan bu deęişimleri tanımlamak ve bu gelişmelerin bölgesel istikrarın sağlanmasına yönelik olarak uzun vadede güvenlikleştirmenin iptaline ve normalleşmeye geçilmesine yol açma potansiyellerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Basra Körfezi, Güvenlik, Güvenikleştirme, Ortadoęu

Introduction

Gulf's security is a widely studied field in inter-disciplinary Gulf Studies as the region has been considered one of the most strategic security hub by the global powers. There is a common tendency of approaching the Persian Gulf from the security perspective in mainstream studies, as if the region naturally and constantly produces insecurity. The security of the Persian Gulf which is a major energy hub and a transition point for global oil flow, and trade, is of very strategic importance not only in regional politics but also in global politics. However, a critical approach is adopted to the concept of regional security in this article based on the fact that the regional security map has not been designed by the regional actors, based on their security objectives and interests but rather by global powers, based on their hegemonic objectives and interests. Controlling and designing regional security has become a crucial matter for the maintenance of the US-led Western hegemony since the end of the Second World War as the Gulf States' strategic importance has increased based on their increasing oil exporting and financial capacities. To control and design security of the Persian Gulf, the US-led Western alliance established a security system in the region through cooperation with the regional allies. The regional security system set by the West, has evolved and shaped at different stages in line with the regional geopolitics that has changed every decade. The US started arming Iran and Saudi Arabia based on the Twin Pillar policy in the 70s to fill the power vacuum created by Britain's withdrawal from the region in 1971 against the Soviets in the Cold War context. The 1973 oil crisis was a milestone to increase Gulf States' security expenditures along with their tremendously increasing oil revenues. The prolonged 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War period exposed another serious security campaign, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution that had changed regional power balances against the West. The Gulf has been turned into a pivotal international security hub during the 1990-91 Gulf Wars starting the direct US military presence in the region. Most of the Gulf States promoted their security commitments under the US security umbrella within the framework of the US *Dual Containment Policy* to contain Iran and Iraq, in the '90s. US military hegemony had been deepened in the post-9/11 context by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 in the framework of the Global War on Terror (GWOt) Doctrine. After 2011, in the post-Arab Spring context, a further stage of the regional securitization has been configured within the framework of the counter-revolution conducted to reinforce the status quo throughout the Middle East, in which Yemen, Syria, and Libya have turned into battlefields. Since the Biden administration started in 2021, as the US involvement in the region has weakened, significant changes emerged in the power balances against the US-led regional security architecture, although substantial implications of the securitization have continued to prevail. In this context, it's been observed that the regional allies of the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have adopted an independent approach loosening their definitive commitment to the US policies in regional politics through advancing cooperation with China and Russia.

The main argument of this article is that in all these stages of the US-imposed regional security system, the Gulf was exposed to securitization through the militarization of the Gulf States and the US-led foreign military involvement, based on the political objectives of

the US hegemony rather than actual security issues of the region. Therefore, this article adopts a critical approach to the US-led established regional security architecture that demonstrates a deficit between the epistemological and ontological dimensions of the regional security. Thus, based on the core question of whose/what security is concerned, threat perceptions will be examined in this article to define what actually threatens whose' security within the framework of securitization theory. The concept of securitization, among the Critical Security Studies, was introduced by the Copenhagen School. Securitization theory with a critical approach to the traditional understanding of security, basically argues that an issue is first politicized and then turned into a security issue, and sources of threats are determined politically (Waever, 1995: 46-86). Ole Waever and Barry Buzan, the founders of the Copenhagen School, define securitization as a process of transforming a political matter into security. Problems in the political sphere do not directly pose a security threat, but actors choose to transform the problem into a security problem to make a securitization projection. Securitizing actors along with functional actors build a security complex in which extraordinary measures are taken based on the central elements of existential threat and referent object through a speech act (Buzan, Waever, Wilde, 1998: 23-45). The definition of an existential threat based on political interests plays a key role in building security through the creation of a narrative on the vitality of eliminating this existential threat immediately to legalize securitization. As securitization produces anti-democratic results, it is determined as a negative phenomenon and de-securitization is required. (Waever, 1995).

While securitization theory is state-centered, it provides multi-level analysis from individual-level securitization to the global level. At the international level, the Cold War and the GWOt in the post-9/11 context represent global-level securitizations defined as Macrosecritization by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever, 2009: 254). Macrosecritization under the GWOt has been carried out on a larger scale than that of the Cold War, based on a universal threat definition of terrorism, and universal referent object, peace and security, appealing to all states and nations beyond ideological differences to justify the US' invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Buzan, Waever, 2009: 257-262).

While during the Cold War, the rivalry between the superpowers shaped and reflected in regional security dynamics in several regions, in the post-Cold War context regional security complexes were developed rather independently based on regions' own security interests as the global level rivalry was over. The European Union has constituted a well-fitting example of a natural development of regional security based on its own dynamics after the Cold War (Buzan, Waever, 2003:55-58). However, the regions with a post-colonial geopolitical structure such as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have not followed their natural development process in establishing regional security as the superpower intervention has continued. In the case of the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular, the relevance between the security of the region and the great powers' interests maintained its determining importance.

Two main factors are significant to explain the importance of controlling security of the Gulf for the security and stability of the US hegemony. The first one is the vast hydrocarbon reserves that the region possesses, about 65% of the world's total, which are significant for the stability of global oil flow and prices as the determinant factor in global energy geopolitics and political economy. The security of the flow of the Persian Gulf's oil and financial reserves are very vital for the stability of the hegemony of the American currency in the global markets and industries, the US Dollar as both are operated based on US Dollars deposits which is what is called as petro-dollars. Moreover, Gulf States' vital

importance for the global political economy also lies in their extensive investment capacities for the major global companies. Therefore, controlling the security and politics of the region is vital to maintain the hegemony on the entire global political and economic system (Özev, 2017: 165-167). The other main factor is the unchanging primacy of the “Israeli security” matter in the US foreign policy agenda towards the region. This factor is also significantly effective in the aim of controlling and designing security and political architecture of the region as the anti-Israeli sentiment and the Palestinian cause as an Islamic and Pan-Arab identity, is one of the integral elements of the regional geopolitics. The states that adopt anti-Israeli foreign policies such as Iran and Iraq have constituted a handicap for the stability of the US-led political hegemony in the region and are seen major sources of threat to regional stability and security.

The stability of the modern global hegemony can be sustained based on sustainable cooperation with the regional actors in the political economy as Robert O. Keohane remarks “*The theory of hegemonic stability predicts that the more one such power dominates the world political economy, the more cooperative will interstate relations be*” (Keohane, 1984: 34). Therefore, establishing hegemonic cooperation in the region is the key issue for the stability of the US’ global hegemony. The US has developed a robust and deepening security cooperation with the Arab Gulf States since the 90s and covered them under the US security umbrella which has shaped the regional security architecture. It has to be underlined that, as the agency and structure complement each other (Kamrava, 2018: 16), the allied state as a regional actor, plays an essential role in the maintenance of the securitization of the region through its alliance with the hegemon, based on consent which is significantly linked to the political economy of the Gulf States that results in weakness and vulnerability of their regime security (See, Kamrava, 2012: 39-68). The politically projected securitization of the region, while providing security in a general sense, generates a security dilemma as it has been sustained at the expense of the regional stability and political and economic interests of the Gulf States. The regional securitization has caused the regional allies’ constant security dependency on the US-led Western powers based on the maintenance of their insecurity. The allied Gulf States’ insecurity and security dependency have been maintained through manipulation of threat perceptions and conflict between them and the non-allied regional actors. Thus, the stability of the US’ alliance with the regional actors is essential factor for maintaining regional securitization, as well as the regional securitization is essential for maintaining the hegemonic alliance through long-term security cooperation and therefore, for the stability of the US hegemony.

In the first part of the article, the regional securitization in the 1971-2001 period is analyzed based on the securitization elements, the securitizing actors, threat and referent objects within the framework of the regional dynamics. In the second part, the changing dynamics of the regional securitization in the post-9/11 era are evaluated. In the third part, the evolution of the regional securitization in the post-“Arab Spring” context with changing dynamics is analyzed. In the fourth part, the recent developments in the regional geopolitics that challenge the US-led regional securitization are analyzed along with their repercussions on the changing foreign policy approaches of the Gulf States.

1. Securitization in the Gulf from 1971 to 9/11

British withdrawal in 1971 started a new era in the regional geopolitics in which Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (BAE), and Bahrain became new independent states and a power vacuum emerged leading the regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran to compete for regional leadership. The US as the new super power, wanted to establish its control on the

regional politics and security to fill the vacuum by militarizing two major regional allies and by favoring the remaining British influence in the region, instead of directly involving to prevent Soviets expansion in the Cold War context. Thus, the administration of the President Richard Nixon embarked the first phase of the regional securitization within the framework of the “Twin Pillar” strategy through which Saudi Arabia and Iran were employed as the US’ surrogates to protect interests of the US-led West. Then, the US rapidly developed its security collaboration with the two states through extensive armament and military assistance.

1.1. 1973 Oil Crisis: A Regional Milestone

Just in two years, during the Yom Kippur War, the fourth Arab-Israeli War erupted in October 1973, the Saudi leader King Faisal initiated an oil embargo under the OPEC leadership against the US who was clearly backing Israel against the Arabs. All the oil exporting Gulf States as the OPEC members except Oman, joined the boycott implemented through the cut of the oil production. 1973 oil embargo resulted in the global oil crisis through the dramatically rising oil prices and the oil shortage, and enormous increase in the oil revenues of the Gulf States. The oil embargo that significantly increased the political weight of the Gulf countries in the international energy geopolitics and political economy in parallel with increasing financial power of the Gulf States, became a milestone in the modern history of the Persian Gulf. It was also very significant to demonstrate the importance and impact of the Arab-Israeli issue for the Gulf States leading them to take such an initiative challenging the West. As matter of fact, European countries that had found themselves in a substantial energy dependency with the outbreak of the oil crisis, in order to prevent the Gulf countries from using the oil weapon again, started the Euro-Arab Dialogue (EAD) in 1974 to prove that they shared Arab states’ sensitivities on the Palestine-Israel issue (Çavuşoğlu, 2022: 25).

The oil boom in the Gulf States had significant consequences for the regional security as it paved the way for the US to accelerate the arms sales to Iran and Saudi Arabia and the arms race was escalated in the Gulf. In 1974, US arms sales to the Persian Gulf reached to 4.4 billion \$, 54 % of total (Kennedy, 1975: 14). Following the 1973 oil crisis Gulf States started an arms race through their boosting financial reserves based on increasing oil revenues and the Gulf as an extremely strategic area of global hegemony turned into a center of global scale securitization through hegemonic alliances in Cold War context. The US was the leading arms exporter of the Western ally Gulf States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Oman, followed by Britain, France and Germany, while the Soviet Union was exporting arms to Iraq. Gulf became the most lucrative market for the arms producing countries and thus the vast amount of petrodollars of the Gulf were canalized into the Western economy. Iran became the region’s major military power receiving one third of the US arms sales to the world between 1973-1978 not only in quantity but also in quality (Ayoob, 2011:124-125). Iran became region’s major military power receiving one third of the US arms sales to the world between 1973-1978, not only in quantity but also in quality (Ayoob, 2011:124-125). As a result of Iran’s extensive armament and political and military commitment with the US, the pro-American Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was called as “America’s policeman”.

The main driver behind the Gulf States’ arms race was the threat perception towards communism and the Soviet influence and expansion. Therefore, Soviet-influenced Iraq was seen as the main regional threat for the Gulf states and their insecurity towards Iraq was fueled by the US. Edward Kennedy noticed about the danger of the American policy of

armamenting the Gulf States as early as 1975 in his article by remarking that the fear of Soviet threat had been exaggerated, and in fact the possibility of expansion of Soviet influence and presence relying on the Soviets-Iraqi ties was very limited in the Gulf (Kennedy, 1975: 19-22). However, Gulf States' increasing insecurity and vulnerability based on the threat perception towards the Soviets-Iraqi ties were significant for the US-led Western interests to strengthen their dependency to the West and to led them to promote their military cooperation and commitment with the US. The rentier system of the political economy of the Arab Gulf and Iranian regimes generating authoritarianism and regime insecurity was a prominent factor in the Gulf States' increasing insecurity and their eager to develop security cooperation with US and so that in the US' empowering hegemony in the region (Kamrava, 2018: 80-81). The oil wealth of the Gulf states is referred to as the "resource curse" in the literature because of the rentier political economy bringing dependency on the oil sector (Kamrava, 2018 d: 1-12).

The US administration declared its aim of designing and controlling Persian Gulf's security to give impetus the regional securitization by announcing a memorandum in 1978. It is stated that the US "... precede and facilitate an increase in the current levels of Western military sales to the region, the development of a base infrastructure, and, ultimately, an expansion of the US military presence in the region, if necessary" (Office of the Historian). Followingly, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 provided a ground for the US to justify a possible direct military involvement in the Gulf very timely and the "Carter Doctrine" was declared in January 1980. The hostage crisis emerged in Iran in 1979 following the Iranian Revolution also contributed to justification of the Carter doctrine. President Jimmy Carter stated in his speech that "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (Jimmy Carter Library). The doctrine was implemented by the Carter administration through the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force which was transformed into the US Central Command (CENTCOM) by the Reagan administration in 1983 (Ayoob, 2011: 126).

1.2. 1979 Iranian Revolution: The Demise of the Policeman and the Birth of A New Threat

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, as a watershed in the Gulf geopolitics and in the Middle East and Islamic world in broader terms with substantial consequences, became a turning point starting the further stage of the deepening regional securitization. The Islamic Revolution not only changed the regime in Iran but also changed the dynamics of regional geopolitics and the power balances. The Iranian Revolution resulted in the loss of the major hegemonic ally in the region for the US and meant the fall of the stronger pillar of the US' twin pillars system shaping the regional security architecture. The new regime of Iran, the Islamic Republic maintained the major position of Iran in the regional securitization led by the US but not as a major ally but as a major enemy. The Islamic Republic with its ideological and political opposition to the American hegemony constituted the main source of threat for the sustainment of the US-led regional system. Main aspects of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic as outlined in four basic principles demonstrated Islamic Republic's political discordance with the US 1. No dependence on East or West, 2. The designation of the United States as the chief enemy, 3. The struggle against the Zionist enemy and for the liberation of Jerusalem, and 4. Support for all oppressed peoples and specially oppressed Muslims (Ramazani, 1983: 21).

Islamic revolution created a great impact on the rising movements of political Islam and inspiration throughout the whole Islamic geography while the impact of Arab Nationalism was decreasing in the Middle East during the 80's, by presenting an example of the victory of a Muslim nation against the Western imperialism (Esposito, Piscatory, 1989: 8-15). It was the basic reason why Iran emerged as the new source of threat in the region representing the political Islam when the Cold War was de-escalating towards the collapse of the Soviets Union. Iran's potential political influence on the other states in the Middle East against the US hegemony put forth a substantial threat for the US and Western interests. To prevent Iranian political influence in the region, fear of Iran was cultivated with the "Iranian threat" perception that was built based on the argument that Iranian regime's aspire and potency of exporting revolution to the Gulf states based on its influence on the Shia minorities. In this threat definition, the actual referent object of the Iranian threat, the Western interests, was manipulated through being replaced with Gulf States' regime security. A sectarianist discourse was adopted by the Anglo-American policies to manipulate Iran-Arab Gulf States relations based on the so-called "sectarian conflict" (Çavuşoğlu, 2022 b: 112-116).

In the post-revolutionary context, the rebel states of the region with anti-Western political posture, Iran which had become a military power of the region by the US militarization before the revolution, and Iraq, were defined as the main threats and the regional securitization was deepened against them. In October 1980, the Iran-Iraq War erupted with the Iraqi invasion of the Iranian land. There could have been no better way to weaken these unwanted regimes than by making them fight each other in a war. (Kamrava, 2005: 172-175). The War endured with a stalemate for eight years as the Anglo-American policies supported the prolonging of the War through arms sales to both belligerents and the US-led West did not intervene for a ceasefire until the Iran was getting close to victory in 1988. The US and its allies did not want either side's victory although officially tilted on Iraq against Iran and supplied arms to Iraq openly while secretly to Iran. British foreign minister Douglas Hurd's comments reveal the British policy toward the war: *"To us, both Iraq and Iran were run by unpleasant and potentially dangerous regimes. Total victory by either would increase the danger. In London, Peter Carrington and I argued for caution in supply of arms to both sides"* (Çavuşoğlu, 2018: 55-56). The US supported Iraq to prevent an Iraqi defeat that would let Iranian hegemony in the region emerge and to protect regional power balances (Ayoob, 2011: 128). Iran was the main target in the first decade of the Islamic Republic. The Arab Gulf States also supported Iraq against Iran. Therefore, the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war provided a great opportunity for the deepening of regional securitization. The militarization of the Gulf was intensified through arms sales to the other Gulf states as well amid escalated insecurity during the War. The War ended with no winner but with about a million dead and injuries and incalculable economic loss on both sides.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) established in 1981, announced in 1983 that it was establishing a joint rapid deployment force, *Peninsula Shield*, to achieve collective security and the region's military self-reliance. It was indeed a significant step toward the development of the regional security system as indicated by the statement of Secretary-General Abdullah Bishara that Gulf security had to be provided by the people of the Gulf and foreign troops, no matter how friendly, could never act in the interests of the Gulf (Zahlan, 1998: 160). The GCC force started a military exercise in the Gulf waters and the decision to create a strike force under the Saudi commandment was announced (Zahlan, 1998: 160). However, the GCC's initiative to shape regional security and to develop regional

self-reliance could not reach a success as the US-led regional securitization was prevailing. Throughout the decade, Saudi Arabia poured about \$50 billion into building a Gulf-wide air defense system to US and NATO specifications for the use of the US in a crisis (Wenger, Stork, 1991). The US Army constructed a \$14 billion network of military facilities across Saudi Arabia with military cantonments, port facilities, military schools, air forces complexes, navy support facilities, and training facilities for the Saudi National Guard (Wenger, Stork, 1991).

1.3. The Gulf War and Beyond: From Surrogate Strategy to Rapid Deployment

The US' support of the Iraqi Saddam regime during the Iran-Iraq War against Iran encouraged Saddam Hussein who had failed to achieve his goal in the war, to venture into another invasion. On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait which, Iraq historically had a claim on, one of the wealthiest countries in the world with vast oil reserves in the Gulf. Saddam's unexpected invasion of Kuwait caused a great shock for the US as well as the Gulf states backing Saddam against revolutionary Iran during the war. The US-led international coalition immediately started an operation to liberate Kuwait, unlike they had adopted an indifferent approach when Saddam invaded Iran and during the eight-year-long War. The Gulf War started with the first phase, *Operation Desert Shield*, which was not successful to repel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Saddam did not withdraw his troops from Kuwait and the Gulf War went on with the second phase, *Operation Desert Storm*, which was launched on January 16, 1991. After weeks of massive aerial bombardment on the Iraqi targets including civilians, the Gulf War ended as Saddam had to accept the UN Resolutions, and the ceasefire was made.

It is defined as the "War of Miscalculations" as the Bush administration miscalculated the seriousness of Saddam's intention while Saddam miscalculated the international reactions and the public mood in the US (Kamrava, 2005: 185-186). The Gulf War did not only result in thousands of civilian deaths but also significant consequences for regional politics and security. In the Middle East in general, the Arab cause, Pan-Arabism, which had already weakened since the 1967 defeat of Nasser and the 1977 Camp David Accord of Anwar Sadat with Israel, was considerably damaged (Kamrava, 2005: 192-193). In the Gulf, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait reversed the Arab Gulf States' position against the Iraqi regime and towards Iran who supported Kuwait's liberation during the War. The Arab Gulf States started to improve their relations with Iran after the Gulf War. The Gulf War's most significant and long-term consequence for Gulf security was that the US' establishment of its direct and permanent military presence in the Gulf States started and regional securitization was given impetus in the new phase.

In the US-led regional securitization in the post-Gulf War period, the US security cooperation with the Gulf States and the number of US and European States' military bases in the Gulf dramatically increased. The GCC States implicitly acknowledged that the GCC was not able to provide regional defense requirements under the circumstances (Zahlan, 1998: 160-61). In September 1991, the US signed a 10-year security agreement with Kuwait worth \$215 million and deployed its troops by using Kuwait's ports and airports (Zahlan, 1998: 190). The US re-established the 5th Fleet at the naval base in Bahrain where he had settled in 1971 after the British withdrawal and consolidated its security cooperation with the other GCC countries by renewing bilateral security agreements. A half million American troops were deployed in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-led arms race escalated with disproportionate amounts of purchases of weapons that went far beyond their needs and capacities of use. Saudi Arabia's annual military expenditure increased from \$23.8 billion in

1988 to \$29.6 billion in 2003 (Yıldız, 2020). Therefore, the regional system entered a new stage, in which the Gulf was fully securitized, within the framework of the US's "Dual Containment" policy by the Clinton Government to alienate two major powers of the Gulf, Iran, and Iraq. Containing Iran project included economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and preventing technology transfer while containing simultaneously Iraq was implemented through a weapons inspection regime, enforcement of no-fly zones, and imposing economic sanctions as well (Ayoob, 2011: 130-131). The securitization dramatically increased Gulf States' security dependence on the US as aimed thus it chronicled their insecurity in the framework of the patron-client relationship between the US and the GCC States, instead of preventing insecurity.

2. The Pax-Americana after 9/11 through the GWOt

The 9/11 attacks, while demonstrating that the US, the global superpower, having been exposed to such terrorist attacks at the heart of the state, revealed a startling vulnerability and security deficit, ironically, provided the necessary terms and opportunities the US needed to upgrade its hegemony to an unchallenged and unquestionable level. Indeed, the 9/11 attacks granted the US a lasting opportunity that fulfilled its significant need of defining a new threat and justification effectively to consolidate its hegemony by advancing its military expansion in the post-Cold War period. Terrorism emerged as the new threat to fight against, out of 9/11 to fill the threat gap that had occurred by the demise of the Soviet threat, to legitimize the US' new war targeting the Middle East within the framework of the GWOt. The US implemented the most powerful macrosecuritization through the GWOt, as the terrorism threat, its central element, was inclusively universal so calling for a global-level-approval and support beyond ideological differences based on a universal referent object such as civilization and humanity (Buzan, Waever, 2009: 253-76). Thus, the US transformed its political and hegemonic objectives into a global-level security issue in the framework of a speech act. Under the GWOt, which was defined as the "globalization of political violence" by Richard Falk, the US invaded Afghanistan immediately and invaded Iraq in 2003 (Falk, 2007: 2-9).

The irrelevance of the US invasion of Iraq to the framework of the GWOt indicated that the GWOt was used for the political objective of the US to legalize the invasion of Iraq with the mission of changing the Saddam regime that was left incomplete in the Gulf War, with the pretext of the allegation Saddam regime's using weapons of mass destruction (WMD). As a matter of fact, a letter had been sent to President Bill Clinton in 1998 stating that Iraq should be intervened for the 21st century to be the American century by the New American Century Project (PNAC), established by the Neo-Conservative group in 1997. (Toman, Akman, 2014: 298). President Bush's speech defining Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as "the evil of Axis" was revealing the political objective of the US invasion of Iraq that it was a necessary step for American political and hegemonic interests to design the regional and global order through a macrosecuritization. Ayoob remarks how the war was operated based on politically created threats with the pretext of preventing terrorism "... the Bush doctrine of "preventive war," which espoused American military action against "presumed" and not just "actual" or "imminent" threats, such massive deployment could easily act as an incentive for military action, as it did in the case of the invasion of Iraq. It did not matter in context whether Saddam possessed WMDs or not" (Ayoob, 2011: 132).

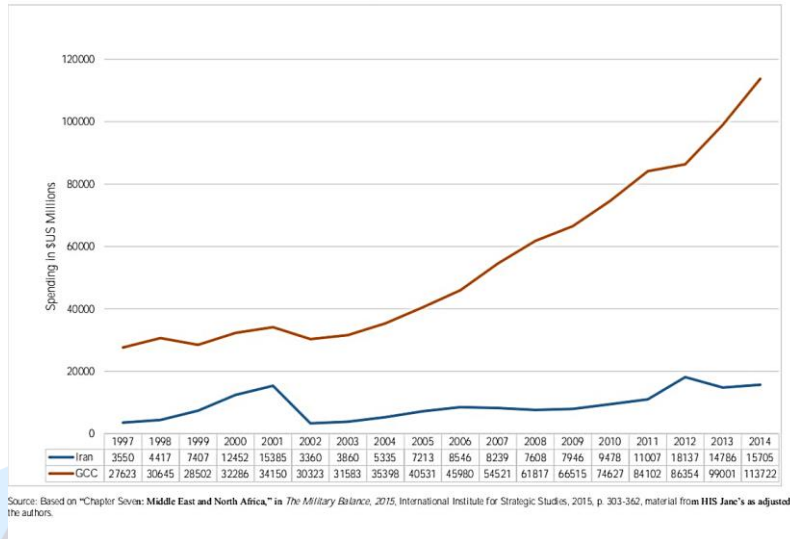
The invasion of Iraq and the deepening American military settlement in the region has had devastating consequences not only in Iraq but also in the region resulting in a deepening instability. The Arabian Peninsula's centrally strategic importance increased in

this securitization for the goals of changing the regime in Baghdad and reinforcing the containment of Iran as it had become the US' largest and the most developed military hub in the 90s in addition to its vital importance as the world's most strategic energy hub and transit point. Iran and Iraq continued to be the major targets of the deepening securitization in the decade of the millennium as the discordant elements in the US-designed regional political and security architecture. The regimes of Iran and Iraq were the main sources of threat not only for the US hegemonic interests but also for the "Israeli security" and Israeli predominance in the region with their anti-Israeli foreign policies (Kamrava, 2005: 200-201, Ayoob, 2011: 133). The goal of the Iraqi invasion was achieved by the execution of Saddam in 2006, and Iran left as the single major threat in the US-designed regional order.

The new regime of Iraq under Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki with a Shia domination, started a new era in Iraqi politics in which the political Shia raised. The repercussions of increasing sectarianism in Iraq were reflected in the US-led anti-Iran campaign (Çavuşoğlu, 2022b: 128-130). The US policy of isolating Iran was imposed on the Gulf allies based on sectarianism and Iran's Nuclear technology development (Kostiner, 2011: 104-108). However, the Saudi-led Gulf States did not want to isolate Iran and Iran policy was the major gap between Saudi and the US regional policies (Gause, 2010: 6-14, Kostiner, 2011: 104-105). Iran-Arab Gulf States relations which had been revived after the Gulf War were promoted to strategic cooperation after the Iraqi invasion, through the highest-level mutual visits during Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidencies (Kamrava, 2011: 196-198). This was one of two primary factors leading the US to pursue more Israeli interests-based approaches by imposing more severe sanctions and isolation on Iran as the improving Iran-GCC States relations were against the US political projection in the region. As Iran was more marginalized in the region by the US-led security system, it pursued a more expansionist agenda in the Middle East based on its sectarian influence in the supposed "Shia crescent" including Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria surrounding and threatening Israeli borders. Moreover, Iran's close relationships with HAMAS in Palestine in the 2000s beyond the area of its sectarian influence created a serious threat to Israel. (Bahgat, 2006: 41-51). These developments constituted the other significant factor leading the US to impose a more aggressive anti-Iran policy, based on the core matter, the "Israeli security".

A significant difference between the security policies of the Saudi Arabia-led GCC States and Iran has been the primary reason causing regional instability and a chronic security dilemma in the Gulf. While the GCC States were deepening their security dependency under the US security umbrella which was established to contain Iran, Iran pursued a constant policy that the security of the Gulf can only be ensured by the Gulf actors without marginalizing Iran and foreign interventions should not be allowed. Iran has sought to develop security cooperation with its neighbors while the GCC states excluded Iran in their security projections. (Kamrava, 2011:184-206). As a result, from the 1980s to the 2000s, as Kamrava describes, the Gulf witnessed "*the development of an American-led and orchestrated asymmetrical military balance against Iran*" (Kamrava, 2018 a: 181). It has resulted in a vicious cycle of a security dilemma in the region that heavy armaments of the Gulf States which, were built with kind of an offensive weaponry instead defensive ones, brought more marginalization of Iran and produced more profound insecurity of the Gulf states. (Lawson, 2011: 51-56). This US-designed security architecture constituted the basic structure of the regional securitization and was vital for its sustainability.

Figure II.2: IISS Estimate of Iranian vs. Arab Gulf State (GGC) Military Spending in Current \$US Dollars, 1997-2014



3. The Sectarianization in the Post-Arab Spring Context

The "Arab Spring" uprisings that had resulted in substantial regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt initially, lost their impact and potency of producing a great Arab revolution shortly as defeated by the counter-revolutionary project. A new geopolitical architecture has started in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in which the Gulf played a central and leading role. The Arab Spring revolutions changing the decades-old autocratic regimes in the MENA and spreading to the Gulf in Bahrain caused substantial fear of the centuries-old Gulf monarchies losing their power. Gulf States' regime security concerns and Israeli security concerns converged in this context based on the same threat perception towards political Islam in general, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and its variants in particular. Through the US-led covert alliance between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain and Israel, a multi-dimensional war was started against the MB and Iran, and their supporters to protect the regional status quo. The war between the status quo and change framed the regional political order that was divided into status quo states and counter-hegemonic states. Saudi Arabia and Israel as the status quo powers were on one side and Iran and Türkiye as the counter-hegemonic powers were located at the other side of the top of the regional hierarchy pyramid, while the allied states and pragmatic middle powers in the middle and the weak states were placed at the bottom (Kamrava, 2018b: 11-13). This hierarchical order itself became the source of the regional instability in the post-Arab Spring era (Kamrava, 2018b: 13-16). The regional political conflict resulted in the 3.5-year-long Qatar Crisis (2017-2021), the dysfunction of the GCC, and wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya at the climax of the regional securitization (Çavuşoğlu, 2022: 90-94).

In the last stage of the regional securitization in the post-Arab Spring context, significant changes emerged not in substance but in methods and instruments. The most prominent change that occurred in the regional securitization has been that the US direct military presence has started to diminish while the US control and indirect involvement were maintained within the concept of 'leading from behind' (Kamrava, 2018 a: 170-171) through the employment of state and non-state proxies. In this context, terrorist organizations as non-state actors have efficiently functioned in the sustainment of securitization within the framework of the GWOt based on empowering the terrorism threat to legitimize more foreign military involvement and destabilize the region through their active involvement in multiple conflict zones. Eventually, the war on terrorism did not

prevent terrorism but on the contrary, generated terrorism. As Al-Qaeda was weakened by the US operation killing its leader in 2011, the so-called “Islamic State” (DAESH) that emerged in 2013, has been operating with intensified violence in a larger domain involving the conflict zones in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Terrorist organizations such as YPG-PYD and SDG as the branches of the PKK were also effectively used as proxies in the Syrian War through US military support. Another significant change that emerged in this context and remarkably contributed to the deepening and complexity of the securitization was the military involvement of multiple regional and global actors in the conflict zones from the UAE to Russia, besides the US and European Powers.

The status quo states of the region as the proxy states have been employed to fight for the US political objectives in the region within the framework of the mentioned multi-dimensional status quo war in political and military terms, in the post-Arab Spring context. Saudi Arabia as the leading proxy state of the US power projection in the region along with the UAE has started a great war against Iran politically in general terms and militarily by the Yemen War, under the leadership of Prince Muhammed bin Salman (MbS). As a result, the Iran-Saudi Arabia tension has escalated based on a sectarian discourse. In this stage, regional securitization was carried out through sectarianization in which the securitizing actors, the US, and its regional allies, intensified the regional conflict with sectarianist propaganda to contain and weaken the “Iranian threat”. The term sectarianization was introduced by Nadir Hashemi and Danni Postel to remark mainly on state-level sectarian discriminatory policies in the Middle East (Hashemi, Postel, 2017). In this article, securitization refers to a regional-level political projection that was produced based on a discourse act through perception engineering and manipulation of the regional actors’ foreign policies in the US-led designing regional political order. (Çavuşoğlu, 2022: 105-106, 139-143). In this context, the discourse of “sectarian conflict” was extensively promoted in defining regional politics in political, academic, media/social media discourses to present sectarianism as if it was the major dynamic and natural source of regional conflicts. Hashemi and Postel define the explanation of all conflicts in the Middle East as the result of a historical sectarian conflict although sectarian conflict had not been determinant in the political history of the Middle East and Islamic geography, as ‘new Orientalism’ (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 2-3).¹

The discourse of “Saudi-Iran rivalry” was coupled with the discourse of “sectarian conflict” deliberately in the mainstream approach of studies on regional politics not to point out the real facts but rather to build a perception to maintain an intra-regional conflict.

¹ The sectarian divergence, a historical fact in the Middle East and wider in the Islamic world, had not turned out to be a source of conflict throughout history until identity politics shaped modern nation-state formations (Makdisi, 2000). In the Gulf particular, people of the Arabian and Persian sides of the Gulf lived together in peace and harmony under the common identity of the Gulf (Khaleeji) through shared sea trade, fishing and pearling, based on the religious tolerance for the centuries (Potter, 2009: 1-26). When nationalism was raised in the modern era, the identity-based dissociation between the two sides of the Gulf emerged not based on religious or sectarian identities but rather based on ethnicity (Potter, 2016: 113-114). During and after the state formations in the Arab Gulf States, while Sunni Islam was one of the components in building national identities, the Shia minorities (approximately 10% in Saudi Arabia, 35% in Kuwait, 20% in Qatar, 15% in the UAE, and less than 5% in Oman) except Bahrain with the majority of 70% (Çavuşoğlu, 2022: 110-111) maintained their places as a historically integral part of the society and their sectarian rights were preserved. Under the Wahhabi Saudi regime, the Shia minority was placed in the rentier system and constituted a part of the middle class (Lourer, 2020: 134-135). In Iran, the Sunni minority about 9-10% of the Muslim population was also historically part of the society and maintained their place during the Pahlavi era in secular and Persian nationalist national identity building. After the revolution, through the Shia-dominated national identity formation Sunnis were given a secondary position however, the 1979 constitution granted them a higher legal position than the other minorities and secured their rights with full respect (Nadjmabadi, 2009: 281).

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran were historically rival states as two major powers and energy giants of the region, they had developed relations on the axis of a policy of balance in line with their areas of competition and common interests throughout the 90s and 2000s (Özev, 2016: 83-87), despite the political, ideological, and sectarian differences and the pressure of the US policies. Their rivalry for power in the region had not been transformed into enmity until the post-Arab Spring era. Saudi Arabia which had pursued the policy of developing relations with Iran and embarked on reforms for its Shia minority before the Arab Spring, started an anti-Iran policy with a sectarianist approach to contain Iran in the post-Arab Spring era. (Acar, 2022a: 181-183). Gause points out that Saudis' support of the Shia-led "Iraqia Party" in Iraq and Iran's support of Sunni Hamas in Palestine significantly indicate that the tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran was not rooted in an actual sectarian conflict (Gause, 2014: 13-14). It is in fact, sourced in a significant change in Saudi Arabia's regional policy approaches that occurred in the post-Arab Spring context. The changes that emerged in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy mainly were the threat perception toward Iran, a deliberately employed sectarianist approach, (Kamrava, 2018a:143-144), and an aggressive approach in regional affairs to lead confrontations uncharacteristically (Gause, 2014: 13). Indeed, Saudi Arabia led to set up a coalition to start a war in Yemen in 2015 to prevent Iranian influence, openly reacted against the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) reached by Obama's initiation in 2015, and executed prominent Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr in 2016. Although Saudi Arabia was incited by the attacks on its oil facilities to start the war in Yemen, these attacks contributed to demonizing of Iran by the Trump and Saudi administrations to strengthen the ground of legitimacy for the War. (Oktav, 2022: 255-256).

This sharp change in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy did not occur based on Saudi Arabia's increasing insecurity and actual security concerns towards Iran since the escalation of the tension did not develop mutually. As far as Iran's influence on the Shia minorities, increasing regional influence, and nuclear works are concerned, they were not new developments so did not expose new threats for Saudi Arabia. As Kamrava points out that "... no analysis of the international politics of the Persian Gulf, or that of the larger Middle East, is complete without reference to American policies toward and presence in the region" (Kamrava, 2018 a: 145), indeed, Saudi Arabia's escalation of regional tension based on the "Iran threat" demonstrated the identification of Saudi policies with the US policies through the upgrading of political commitment by MbS during the Trump administration. The advancement of the US-Saudi political alliance was realized through the process of MbS's acquiring power to rule along with the covert Saudi-Israeli consensus achieved by the guidance of the UAE Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), through which Israeli regional security, as well as Prince Salman's de facto power, were secured. (Marcus, 2017). Therefore, Saudi regional foreign policy objectives and behaviors were redefined based on the US' threat definitions and interests instead of Saudi Arabia's own (Çavuşoğlu, 2022: 88-92). Iran while posing a threat to American interests as declared in the 2014 US Defense Department Report (Kamrava, 2018 a: 182-183), did not pose an actual threat to Saudi interests. On the contrary, it was Iran has been exposed to a real security threat as long been contained by the Saudi-led Arab Gulf States' heavy militarization by the US. Therefore, the Saudis' "Iran threat" perception did not represent an actual escalation of Saudi-Iran rivalry based on a sectarian conflict but represented Saudis assuming the role of containing Iran on behalf of the US-Israel-led regional order. MbS who had started the war in Yemen in 2015 when he was the Saudi Defense Minister, increased the dose of hostility towards Iran by threatening it with a direct attack in 2017 in his statement as: "We know we are a main target of Iran,

We are not waiting until there becomes a battle in Saudi Arabia, so we will work so that it becomes a battle for them in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia.” (The Guardian, 2017).

It was the latest phase of the US-led regional securitization through the employment of regional allies under the Saudi leadership to achieve and safeguard US interests and objectives at the expense of regional stability and the interests of regional states by leading from behind. Securitization has produced more insecurity in the region instead of security, presenting a constant security dilemma. American arms sales to Saudi Arabia soared from \$248 million in 2008 to \$607 million in 2013, and \$3,425 million in 2017, to the UAE from \$607 million in 2008 to \$1063 million in 2015, to Qatar from \$280 million in 2009 to \$595 million in 2016, and Kuwait from 1 million in 2009 into \$681 million in 2015 (Cherkaoui, 2020). The US military bases in the Gulf have been empowered with 13 thousand troops in Qatar including Al-Udaid Base with 11 thousand, 13 thousand in Kuwait, 5 thousand in the UAE, 7 thousand in Bahrain, 3 thousand in Saudi Arabia, and 6 thousand in Iraq (Cherkaoui, 2020). Today, around 50 foreign bases, including British, French, Italian, and Chinese, are deployed in the Gulf.

It has also resulted in historic developments for Israel’s long-term goals such as the American acknowledgment of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and the Abraham Accords normalizing relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan, at the expense of the Palestinian cause. Thus, the Trump administration achieved what the previous leaders failed by advancing Israeli interests in the region through close cooperation between the “new-age” Saudi-UAE leaders and Trump’s son-in-law and Middle East advisor Jared Kushner in the framework of the regional status-quo war. (Çavuşoğlu: 2022b: 95-96).

4. Recent Developments that Challenge Western-Designed Security Architecture

The end of the three-and-a-half-year-long Qatari crisis signaled the de-escalation of the post-Arab Spring conflict in the region and the process of reconciliation that has started through the rapprochement between the status quo powers and the others. The Saudi-UAE-led status quo powers have realized the unsustainability of their war which turned out to be a total failure, after Joe Biden’s election in the US. On January 5, 2021, in the 41st GCC Summit in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi and Qatari leaders met and the quartet states, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, announced that they would open land borders and airspaces to Qatar and the Security and Stability Agreement that was signed. Followingly, the quartet states started reconciliation with the states they had targeted such as Türkiye who had close ties with the MB and sympathy for regional political Islamist groups, maintained diplomatic ties with Iran, and established a military base in Qatar challenging the regional status quo war (Vakil, 2021).

The change that has emerged with the U-turn in the Saudi-UAE regional policies as the leading states of the US-led regional status quo, came through in parallel with the weakening of their alliances with the US since Joe Biden was elected as the president in 2021. President Biden did not maintain the Trump-backed regional political order with the regional allies but instead introduced two major policy changes towards the region by withdrawing Trump policies. President Biden did not maintain the Trump-backed regional political design with the regional allies but instead introduced two major policy changes towards the region by withdrawing Trump policies. The first change was toward Iran, the Biden administration announced its aim of starting Nuclear negotiations with Iran to revive the JCPO which was terminated by Trump. The second change occurred in the US approach to Saudi leadership, Biden adopted a critical approach to MbS based on the Yemen

War and Jamal Khashoggi case. Biden declared that he would stop all American support for offensive operations in the War in Yemen including relevant arms sales (The Economist, 2021). Overall under Biden, US' advanced alliance with Saudi Arabia has declined in parallel with the US' weakening engagement generally in Middle East politics and has evolved into tension.

In this changing architecture of regional politics, the foreign policy approaches of Saudi Arabia and the UAE also went through a revision with significant shifts. Mainly, they have started to take off their pro-American posture and to develop independent policies from the US. In this direction, they adopted an approach of diversifying cooperation in security and other strategic fields by improving their relations with non-Western powers and organizations while maintaining their security cooperation with the US. Russia and China have emerged as the major powers in the diversification of the Gulf States' strategic relationships and it remarked the significant shift of axis in their foreign policies independently from the US. Weakening American involvement in Gulf politics provided an opportunity and space for Russia and China to increase their influence and presence in the region. In the meantime, Israel has started its direct security presence in the Gulf following the Abraham Accords through its security cooperation with the United Arab Emirates.

Russia, a strategic ally of Iran, has already developed ties with the Gulf States in mainly energy relations in the 2010s. After the post-Arab Spring context, Russia intended to fill the vacuum in the security deficit that occurred in the Gulf as a result of the US' increasing deficiency in providing regional security. In 2019, following the sabotages of the ships in the Gulf, Russia proposed security cooperation in the Gulf with a strategic move, through the call of *Energetic and Effective Action* for the peace and stability of the region, and published a document titled *Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Gulf Region* (Özev, 2022: 102). Although Russia's renewed call for establishing a Gulf security system in 2020 could not receive interest from the GCC (Özev, 2022:103-104), it paved the way to improve Russian relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After the Russian-Ukrainian War erupted in February 2022, the GCC States did not join the US-led West's anti-Russian campaign nor the sanctions against Russia. Prince Muhammed bin Salman has determined to deepen Saudi ties with Russia (Chulov, 2022). Saudi Arabia's unexpected move to lead OPEC to take the decision of cutting oil production in October 2022 which caused the rise of the oil prices in favor of Russia, escalated tension between the US and Saudi Arabia causing Biden's reaction against the Saudi Prince. (Lee and Liptak, 2023).

The changing security architecture of the Gulf has increased China's interest in involving in regional politics along with the region's increasing strategic importance for China's global-level proactive policies, as well as Gulf States' interest to approach China which has been a rising power. China has been one of the major arms exporters and a security provider of Iran (Acar, 2022b: 63). The 25-year Strategic Cooperation Agreement between China and Iran, signed in March 2021 was very significant not only for the improvement of China's regional influence through strategic cooperation with an important regional power but also for its balancing policy against the US hegemony in the region. For Iran as well, its long-term strategic cooperation with China meant substantial development for its economic recovery and political consolidation in the region. However, China had pursued a cautious and meticulous approach towards regional security to refrain from provoking the US. It had pursued the policy of containing America in the region while refraining from causing a direct military confrontation, which is defined as a "wary dragon" strategy (Acar, 2022b: 71). Therefore, China had developed its ties with the Gulf States in

the last decade rather in less strategic fields mainly in economic and energy relations with the Gulf States. By 2019, China became the biggest foreign investor in the Gulf (Acar, 2022b: 57). Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE have shown a great interest and effort to develop close relationships with China. The first China-GCC Summit that took place in December 2022 in Riyadh, opened a new chapter not only in GCC-China relations but also in regional geopolitics through the increasing domination of China. Saudi Arabia's move towards the China-led Asian security and economic bloc through the status of dialogue partnership it was granted in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2023 (Ebrahim, 2023), is a very significant development to remark changing axis of regional geopolitics against the US-led "pivot to Asia" projection to contain China.

China's recent moves demonstrated that it has transformed its approach from the "wary dragon" strategy to a more assertive approach in regional affairs since the Biden presidency started. China's reliance on the Gulf oil urges China to take the initiative on the stability of the region and the security of the Strait of Hormuz (Babood: 2023). The leader of China Xi Jinping has taken a historic initiative that promises significant potential to change the US-designed regional security and political architecture in the Gulf by brokering a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia on 10 March 2023. The landmark agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia that was signed in Beijing normalized diplomatic relations which were stopped in 2016 between the parties. Following the normalization, foreign ministers of the two states gathered in Beijing for the first formal meeting showing the motivation and willingness of both sides to take concrete steps to restore the ties after a long time of hostility. The former chief of Saudi intelligence Prince Turki Al-Faisal's comment that "*neither the US or Europe would have been able to be an honest broker between the two parties China was a logical partner in making that happen*" (Middle East Monitor, 2023) indicates the Saudis' need and determination to normalize relations with Iran. This unexpected development was observed with suspicious eyes by the US authorities and evaluated with an underestimating approach. Nonetheless, the deal created an atmosphere of hope throughout the region to end the regional tension and provide stability. Indeed, the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is historically significant to promise for starting a new era in the region, through which regional security architecture can be developed by the regional actors through the elimination of regional securitization that was established based on the cultivation of hostility between regional Powers.

Conclusion

The Persian Gulf has been securitized not based on actual security issues sourced in the regional dynamics as it is widely argued but based on rather the US-led Western political and security interests and objectives, with a deepening trend in the contexts of the changing geopolitical conjuncture in each decade, since 1971. Through the securitization, the "regional system" was designed and the regional security architecture was constructed and has been maintained based on the assertion that the region has caused an acute and endemic insecurity. In the 70s, the US designed a security system to control the security of the Gulf which, was a vital issue for the US to fill the power vacuum that emerged from the British withdrawal against potential Soviets expansion as the region's strategic importance increased as an energy hub, based on the "Twin Pillar" strategy in the Cold War context. Within the Twin Pillar policy framework, the US militarized two major powers of the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as its surrogates. In the 80s, the Iran-Iraq War facilitated regional securitization by causing two major and "immoderate" states of the region to fight with each other and the deepening of the "moderate" ally states' security cooperation with the

US. In the 90s, the direct American military presence in the region started by the Gulf War and deepened regional securitization and secured the Gulf states' dependency on the American security system. The 9/11 attacks, as a milestone in world history as well as in regional securitization, started a new era in the region with the deepening US military settlement and expansion in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and the Gulf has become the focal point of the macrosecuritization that was configured in the framework of the GWOt. The latest phase of the securitization which started with the counter-revolution in which the Gulf played the central role in the post-Arab Spring context, has deepened and intensified the securitization with increasing involvement of state and non-state actors, effective use of proxies, and multiple proxy wars, along with increasingly continuing armament of the Gulf States.

Regional securitization has been configured based on the principle elements, an existential threat, referent objects, and supporting actors that are defined by the securitizing actors, namely the US and Western allies based on their hegemonic interests and objectives, and imposed on the regional allies, who have been employed as the supporting actors. Until the 90s, the main existential threat defined for regional security and stability was the Soviets' influence and expansion and Soviets-influenced actors and ideologies in the form of Pan-Arabism/ Arab socialism. Accordingly, Iraq was the major source of regional threat in the Cold War context. By the 1979 Iran revolution, a new threat emerged as political Islam with a rising impact in parallel with the decrease of Arabism along with the decrease of the Soviet influence, in the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 90s. Since then, Iran has maintained its primary position as the major threat in regional securitization. After 9/11, the threat element of the macrosecuritization was defined as terrorism exclusively referring to "Islamic terrorism" by the US in the framework of the GWOt that was built through a speech act based on a universal referent object which was humanity and civilization. In this context, the Middle East-centered macrosecuritization has been sustained through the universal and lasting impact of the maintaining terrorism threat that provided a global acknowledgment and support beyond ideological and political conflicts.

In the framework of macrosecuritization, regional securitization was maintained through the counter-revolution in which the US-allied Gulf states assumed a leading role, in the post-Arab Spring context based on the politicized terrorism threat that was linked directly to political Islam and its agencies Iran and the MB. Saudi Arabia and the UAE through their covert ally with Israel and commitment to the Israeli interests-centered US policies, started a status quo war against the MB and Iran and the regional actors developing relations with them. The Gulf witnessed the most severe political conflict ever in its history led by the US through the escalation of Saudi-Iran tension based on the escalated sectarianization that has resulted in the 3.5-year-long Qatari crisis and still ongoing war and humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen. The so-called "Iranian threat" did not represent an actual threat posing on the Gulf States' security but actually, it exposed an actual threat to Israeli security and American political interests and objectives. In fact, it was Iran which has been surrounded and targeted by the American military presence located on its neighbors, under a real threat. Therefore, the escalation of the Saudi-Iran rivalry through the sectarian discourse stemmed from Saudi Arabia's assuming a leading role of containing Iran on behalf of the US-led regional order and security architecture under Prince Muhammed bin Salman.

In all these periods, the Gulf has been the most strategic center of securitization in which a number of American and other foreign military bases were settled, a dramatically

increasing heavy armament of the Gulf States was carried out and the region was retained in a deepening insecurity and vicious cycle of security dilemma. The Iran-Saudi deal brokered by China is a very significant development promising to change the region's fate and to start a new era in which, a real regional security system led by the regional actors can be established through desecuritization. With the agreement signed between the two states, their diplomatic relations restarted after seven years and the regional tension has already de-escalated. It is expected to be followed by the revival of relations through further cooperation rapidly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, these expectations can be achieved depending on the sustainability of the reconciliation. A possible foreign intervention or manipulation aiming to demise the rapprochement of two countries can obstruct the reconciliation and the prospect of regional stability. Gulf's unavoidable strategic significance will continue with its potential to evolve regional politics based on hegemonic cooperation rather than independent foreign policies of the regional actors. The "Israeli security" factor will also continue to determine the reshaping of regional security architecture. As China is not a military power, it is not expected to replace the US as the security provider. However, China's vital interests lie in the stability of the Gulf based on China's growing dependency on the Gulf oil and the US's relative disengagement in the region will expectedly lead China to dominate the regional politics.

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