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From Tripolarity to Bipolarity: The Transformation of the Gulf Regional Security Complex after the 2003 Iraq War

Üç Kutupluluktan İki Kutupluluğa: 2003 Irak Savaşı Sonrası Körfez Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksinin Dönüşümü

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of security dynamics in the Gulf in the period following the 2003 Iraq War through the analytical lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The 2003 United States-led (the US) invasion of Iraq, triggered a profound restructuring of the Gulf's regional security system by dismantling the pre-war balance of power and catalyzing new patterns of rivalry, alignment, and threat perception. Prior to the invasion, the Gulf operated under a tripolar structure centered on Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. However, the removal of Iraq from this triadic balance fundamentally altered the regional order and led to the emergence of a bipolar regional structure dominated by Saudi Arabia and Iran. By examining developments in this period, this study traces how extra-regional interventions and intraregional rivalries reshaped the Gulf's security architecture. Utilizing RSCT and process tracing, it analyzes the mechanisms driving the shift from tripolarity to bipolarity, offering a framework for understanding evolving patterns of threat perception, alliance formation, and strategic behavior in the region. The study asserts that the post-2003 Gulf system, while more concentrated in terms of power poles, remains volatile, with persistent rivalries and external dependencies shaping its security environment. Understanding this transformation provides critical insights into Gulf politics and the interplay between regional dynamics and external influences in this period, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving Gulf security architecture.

Keywords: The Gulf, Regional Security Complex, Regional Order, Polarity, Strategic Behaivour

Özet

Bu çalışma, 2003 Irak Savaşı'nı takip eden dönemde Körfez bölgesindeki güvenlik dinamiklerinin dönüşümünü Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi (BGKT) perspektifinden incelemektedir. 2003 yılında ABD öncülüğünde gerçekleştirilen Irak işgali, savaş öncesi güç dengesini bozarak ve yeni rekabet, ittifak ve tehdit algısı modellerini tetikleyerek Körfez bölgesinin güvenlik sisteminde köklü bir yeniden yapılanmaya yol açtı. İşgalden önce Körfez, Irak, İran ve Suudi Arabistan merkezli üç kutuplu bir yapı altında işliyordu. Ancak Irak'ın bu üçlü dengeden çıkarılması, bölgesel düzeni temelden değiştirdi ve Suudi Arabistan ve İran'dan oluşan iki kutuplu bölgesel bir yapının ortaya çıkmasına yol açtı. Bu dönemde yaşanan gelişmeleri inceleyen bu çalışma, bölge dışı müdahalelerin ve bölge içi rekabetlerin Körfez'in güvenlik mimarisini nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. BGKT ve süreç izleme yöntemini kullanarak, üç kutupluluktan iki kutupluluğa geçişi tetikleyen mekanizmaları analiz eden çalışma, bölgedeki tehdit algısı, ittifak oluşumu ve stratejik davranışların değişen kalıplarını anlamak için bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Çalışma, 2003 sonrası Körfez sisteminin, güç merkezleri açısından daha yoğunlaşmış olmasına rağmen, güvenlik ortamını şekillendiren süregelen rekabetler ve dış bağımlılıklar nedeniyle istikrarsızlığını koruduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu dönüşümü anlamak, söz konusu dönemde Körfez siyaseti ve bölgesel dinamikler ile dış etkiler arasındaki etkileşime ilişkin önemli içgörüler sağlarken gelişen Körfez güvenlik mimarisini anlamak için kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Körfez, Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi, Bölgesel Düzen, Kutupluluk, Stratejik Davranış

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Introduction

Addressing the question of "how the Gulf security system transformed and functioned after the 2003 invasion of Iraq?", this study examines the evolving dynamics that reshaped patterns of threat perception, alignment, and interaction among Gulf actors in the post Iraq War period. It argues that the collapse of the previously existing tri-polar security configuration anchored in the balancing relationship among Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia and disrupted decisively by the US-led invasion generated a profound structural rupture in the regional order. In the aftermath of this rupture, the emergence of a new bipolar structure, primarily defined by the intensification of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, reconfigured the distribution of power and security interdependencies across the region. This structural transformation altered not only the strategic environment but also the behavior of regional actors, compelling them to adapt their security policies through shifting alliance patterns, increased reliance on external security guarantees, and the growing use of asymmetric and proxy strategies. Thus, the post-2003 Gulf security system became more polarized, fragmented, and volatile, reflecting the deepening securitization of regional rivalries within an interconnected and increasingly unstable security complex.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified by the aim of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and breaking ties between al-Qaeda and the Baath regime, not only transformed Iraq's internal balance of power but also disrupted the regional security order in the Gulf (Fürtig, 2007; Gordon & Trainor, 2006; Dodge, 2012). By toppling the Baathist state structure and removing Iraq from its role as a regional power, the US significantly weakened Iraq's capacity to function as a key actor in the region. As Iraq had been one of the three pillars of the Gulf's tri-polar structure until 2003, its decline had far-reaching consequences for the region's remaining poles, Iran and Saudi Arabia (Gause, 2010; Terrill, 2011). Hence, the Gulf's regional structure, originally characterized by a tripolar balance among Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia until 2003 (Üçağaç, 2024; Fürtig, 2007), shifted to a bipolar framework dominated by Iran and Saudi Arabia following Iraq's removal from the equation. In this new order, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified significantly.

However, neither country had prior experience in managing such a system. In the 1970s, the two conservative countries of the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia, had formed a coalition under the twin pillar policy (Mammadov, 2017), aimed at safeguarding their shared interests against a third party (Republican/Revolutionary Iraq) that posed a threat to both (Üçağaç, 2025). Yet, in the absence of a common external threat, the new configuration pushed Tehran and Riyadh into a security dilemma (Jervis, 1978), pitting them against one another (Fürtig, 2007). In this altered structure, Iran's clear superiority over Saudi Arabia in terms of material power allowed it to shape regional politics, heightening Saudi Arabia's security concerns to the maximum (Wehrey et al., 2009: 15). As a result, the US invasion of Iraq not only disrupted the regional balance but also left Saudi Arabia, a key American ally in the region, increasingly vulnerable against its long-standing rival, Iran (Terrill, 2011; Nasr, 2006). Nevertheless, with the transformation of the regional system from a tripolar to a bipolar structure after the invasion of Iraq, the influence of the US (a global-level actor) within the region also increased more than ever. In this context, the transformation of the traditional tripartite arrangement into a balance-of-power system, in which one party (Saudi Arabia) became more dependent than before on external security guarantees, namely those provided by the US, led to an increase in Washington's influence within the regional system.

Consequently, within this emerging bipolar order, with Iraq effectively removed from the regional power equation, Iran emerged as the dominant force, prompting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states to strengthen their alliance with the US to counter the perceived Iranian threat. Thus, as Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies grew increasingly wary of Iran's ambitions to expand its geopolitical and ideological influence, they sought to build alliances with major global powers particularly the US to contain Tehran's rise (Mabon, 2016). On the other hand, the closer cooperation between Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Arab states, and the US was viewed by Iran as a direct challenge, leading Tehran to adopt more assertive policies. This dynamic gave rise to a pronounced security dilemma within the regional security complex in the Gulf, as both sides perceived the other's actions as escalating threats, driving them to further bolster their respective security postures (Lauritsen, 2021: 68-71).

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study

The security complex in the Gulf is characterized by intense rivalries, deep-seated security concerns, and significant external power involvement. RSCT, a framework that emphasizes how regional security dynamics are influenced by the interactions among states within a specific geographical area, provides a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics, highlighting the interconnectedness of security in the region (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Gause, 2010). It posits that the security concerns of states in a region are interdependent, and the security of one state is often linked to the security of others in that region (Buzan and Waever, 2003). Therefore, understanding regional security dynamics in the Gulf requires treating the region as a security complex and establishing a causal mechanism to track events and assess security outcomes. In this context, analyzing the transformation of the security complex in the Gulf region after the 2003 invasion of Iraq using RSCT requires addressing how various political, military, economic, and social dynamics in the region have shaped the security environment, focusing on both regional actors and external powers.

The Gulf has long been a region of intense geopolitical competition and strategic importance. After the United Kingdom (UK) withdrew from the region in 1971 (Bradshaw, 2020), a new system characterized by strong mutual security dependence emerged in the Gulf region (Buzan and Waever, 2003; Gause, 2010). Since the formation of this security complex, regional security outcomes have arisen through complex, multilevel interactions. From 1971 to 2003, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq constituted the three main pillars of structure in the region. However, the decline of Iraq after the 2003 invasion, reduced the system to two main pillars, Saudi Arabia and Iran (Han and Hakimian, 2019). In this context, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by the US, a global-level power, had a profound impact on the balance of power in the region (Wehrey et al., 2009). With Iraq in disarray, Iran became a more prominent regional power, increasing its influence in Iraq and across the region, particularly through proxy groups in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Nasr, 2006; Gause, 2014). In response, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states became more focused on countering Iran's growing influence, leading to a regional divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has become a defining feature of the region's security dynamics (Cerioli, 2024).

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq removed a major regional balancer, weakened Iraq's state capacity, and enabled unprecedented Iranian political and militia influence, prompting heightened threat perceptions among Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states. Thus, the imbalance created by this transformation in the region exacerbated the mistrust between the

two regional power centers. The depth of mutual suspicion, proxy warfare, and interlinked security fears transformed the Gulf into what Buzan and Waever would call a Conflict Formation (Buzan and Waever, 2003), where states' security dilemmas are tightly interconnected and expectations of violence shape strategic behavior of actors. Moreover, during this period, historically existing sectarian identities also became a security issue, with Riyadh and Tehran framing the Sunni-Shiite divide as an existential issue to mobilize domestic constituencies and regional allies (Wehrey, 2014; Potter, 2014; Matthiessen, 2013), especially in the midst of a regional hegemony contest between the two countries.

Throughout this period, the US remained the primary external security guarantor for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies, but its policies ranging from the destabilizing effects of the 2003 invasion to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 and oscillating commitments under successive administrations, created ambiguity about the US reliability and intentions (Goldenberg et. al. 2015: 25). This perceived drift encouraged Saudi Arabia and some other GCC states particularly the UAE, to pursue more assertive military policies and greater strategic autonomy. By the early 2020s, however, the enormous costs of prolonged proxy conflict produced tentative movement away from pure conflict dynamics, exemplified by the 2023 China-brokered Saudi-Iran normalization agreement and the broader trend of diversified alignments, with Gulf States deepening ties with China, Russia, and India to hedge against the US uncertainty (Tüfekçi and Dağ, 2023). Thus, as stated in the RSCT's main hypothesis, these conditions opened up the possibility for global-level actors to penetrate the region (Buzan and Waever, 2003).

Overall, the post-Iraq War regional security complex in the Gulf continues to function predominantly as a conflict formation, structured around Iranian-Saudi bipolarity and reinforced by enduring patterns of external penetration. At the same time, recent diplomatic engagements point to the tentative and fragile emergence of elements associated with a security regime, as well as limited attempts at de-securitization within the complex. To analyze this transformation of the security complex in the Gulf since 2003, this study employs a qualitative case study design grounded in process tracing method. Process tracing is particularly appropriate for research informed by RSCT, as it enables the systematic identification of causal mechanisms (Checkel, 2008) linking shifts in patterns of amity and enmity, levels of securitization, and external involvement to changes in the structure and dynamics of the regional security complex.

By tracing the interaction between independent variables, such as regional power competition and extra-regional intervention, and dependent variables, such as the configuration and evolution of the regional security complex in the Gulf, this study clarifies how continuity and gradual change coexist in a conflict-dominated security environment. In doing so, the study contributes to the RSCT literature by demonstrating that the removal of a regional pole does not necessarily result in fragmentation or stabilization, but can instead reconfigure a regional security complex from a condition of multipolarity into a more rigid and conflict-prone bipolar structure, particularly when regional dynamics are compounded by enduring involvement from extra-regional actors.

2. Iran and the Regional Balance after the Iraq War

In 2003, the US launched an invasion of Iraq (Yoo, 2003: 563), a state that, although significantly debilitated by the 1991 Gulf War, continued to serve as a central pillar in the Gulf's trilateral balance of power. The dismantling of Iraq's Arab nationalist Baathist regime by the US forces created a strategic vacuum that facilitated the expansion of Iranian

influence in the region (Heiran-Nia, 2023). Aspiring to assert itself as the preeminent regional power in the Gulf, Iran sought to ensure that Iraq, its principal geopolitical rival, remained politically fragmented, institutionally fragile, and strategically dependent (Wehrey et. al, 2010: 25; Alsmadi, 2014; Takeyh, 2009). In pursuit of this objective, Iran began to cultivate influence through Iraq's Shiite population, capitalizing on long-standing sectarian divisions that had persisted beneath the surface during Baath Party's secular authoritarian rule (Haddad, 2011).

The convergence of Iran's sectarian-oriented foreign policy with the US' efforts to reconstruct Iraq's political system along ethnic and sectarian lines contributed to the entrenchment of sectarian polarization, particularly between Sunni and Shiite communities, thereby exacerbating social and political fragmentation within the country (Dodge, 2012; Dağ, 2016). Following the overthrow of the Baathist regime, Iraq's Sunni Arabs (historically dominant in the country's politics) experienced a marked decline in political engagement. This shift created a power vacuum that allowed the Shiite population to assert greater political authority. Despite internal divisions rooted in ideological and tribal affiliations, Iraqi Shiites succeeded in consolidating political influence, bolstered in part by institutional and strategic support from Iran (Nasr, 2006).

Although Shiites constitute only around 15 percent of the global Muslim population, they represent a significant demographic presence within several geopolitically critical Gulf States. Notably, they comprise around 65% of Iraq's population, 90% of Iran's, 60% of Bahrain's, 35% of Kuwait's, and 15% of Saudi Arabia's (Pew Research Center, 2009; Louer, 2008). In Saudi Arabia's oil-rich eastern province of al-Hasa, nearly half of the population is Shiite, contributing to the region's strategic sensitivity and sectarian tension (Wehrey, 2014). This demographic distribution enhances the capacity of Shiite communities to shape regional political dynamics. This also underscores the continued relevance of identity politics in the Gulf, where sectarian affiliation and collective identity frequently serve as decisive factors in political behavior, often surpassing material considerations in determining state and non-state actors' strategic calculations.

In this period of strengthening sectarian politics, a new era in Iran's regional policy began with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in August 2005 (Ehteshami and Zweiri 2007). Ahmadinejad's ascendancy to the presidency introduced a distinct shift in Iran's foreign policy compared to the more moderate stance of his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami. Ahmadinejad's explicit commitment to reinstating the ideological policies of Ayatollah Khomeini significantly amplified the focus on identity politics in the Middle East and the Gulf, thereby enhancing the perceived ideological threats to the regime security of various regional actors (Lim, 2022). Under Ahmadinejad's leadership, Iran's involvement in key regional conflicts, particularly in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, alongside its ambitions for nuclear capability, intensified concerns in the Gulf. These developments positioned Iran as a strategic threat to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab nations, reminiscent of the tensions that characterized the 1980s (Lauritsen, 2021). The ideological underpinnings of this threat, supported by Iran's material capabilities, compelled Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to increasingly align themselves with the US, as a counterbalance to Tehran's growing influence.

Following the collapse of the Baath regime in Iraq, Iran's substantial influence over the country significantly altered the regional balance of power in Tehran's favor. Nevertheless, this ascendancy introduced a set of strategic challenges for Iran. The absence of a capable regional counterweight to Tehran's growing influence resulted in a geopolitical

conundrum. As Saudi Arabia and other GCC member states strengthened their ties with the US, coinciding with the expansion of the US military presence in Iraq, Iran increasingly found itself encircled by regional adversaries and global powers. This evolving strategic environment placed Iran in a vulnerable position, subjecting it to both internal and external pressures that limited its capacity for geopolitical maneuvering (Wehrey et. al, 2010: 23). The establishment of the US military presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula created conditions that Iran perceives as conducive to provoking a potential regime change within its borders, given that Iran regards the US as its primary adversary (Davand and Ghafouri, 2020).

In addition to US encirclement, the political structure emerging in Iraq has posed significant challenges to Iran. While Tehran supported the principle of universal suffrage, with the aim of securing political dominance for the Shiite majority in Iraq, there were several complexities that complicated its position. Notably, while sectarianism among Shiite Arabs was pronounced, nationalism also played a significant role (Al-Qarawee, 2014), leading to uncertainty about whether a Shiite-led Iraq would ultimately align with Iran's long-term strategic interests. Furthermore, the prospect of Shiite governance in Iraq itself posed a range of challenges for Iran. Chief among these were two critical concerns. First, Iraq's religious sites, particularly those in Najaf and Karbala, hold far greater religious significance for Shiites than Iran's sites, such as Qom and Mashhad. This elevated status could potentially give rise to a religious and political center of gravity in Iraq, rivaling Iran's influence over global Shiite communities (Nasr, 2006). Second, influential Iraqi Shiite clerics, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, had long opposed the Iranian model of governance, particularly Khomeini's concept of Velayat-e Faqih (the governance of the jurist) (Al-Khoei, 2016). This opposition led Tehran to concern that an Islamic Republic in Iraq, if established, might diverge from Iran's influence and emerge as a competing power in the Shiite world (Corboz, 2017: 10-14).

Iran's opposition to the US military and political presence in Iraq, coupled with its efforts to prevent the re-establishment of a strong nationalist and centralized authority capable of initiating military actions, placed Tehran in a precarious strategic position. Iran's dilemma arised from the need to balance its opposition to the proliferation of the US military bases in Iraq with its desire to influence the political structure of the neighboring state. In this context, Tehran's ideal scenario would be the reconstruction of Iraq into a federal system that maximizes Iran's influence while preventing the emergence of a powerful central government (Jathoom, 2024: 6). A federalized Iraq, with a weak central authority, would serve Iran's strategic interests by diminishing the likelihood of Baghdad engaging in military conflicts in the short and medium term. This arrangement would allow Iran to maintain stability in its western neighbor while also creating opportunities to expand its economic influence. A stable federal Iraq would provide Iran with a valuable trading partner and potential market for its goods, thus securing economic benefits in addition to strategic ones (Al Sarhan, 2022; Badawi, 2018). Moreover, such a scenario would limit Iraq's ability to challenge Iran's regional aspirations, effectively ensuring that Tehran's influence over Iraq remains significant.

On the other hand, Tehran's growing influence in Iraq, both ideationally and materially, disrupted the regional power dynamics, particularly disturbing Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states. As Iran's role in Iraq strengthened, these countries began to perceive a shift in the regional balance of power that was unfavorable to their interests. Therefore, in 2005, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal voiced his concerns,

remarking; "After Iraq was expelled from Kuwait, we fought together to prevent Iran from invading Iraq, and now we are handing the whole country over to Iran for no reason" (Shabbar, 2014: 61; Takeyh, 2008). This sentiment reflected the unease in the Gulf over Iran's increasing influence, particularly as rising oil prices in this period provided Tehran with both economic leverage and an enhanced strategic position. Thus, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states adopted a more cautious stance toward Iran, wary of its growing regional power (Gause, 2010).

3. Repercussions of the Iraqi Invasion for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab States

The US invasion of Iraq ushered in a difficult period for Saudi Arabia, one of the three poles of the region. Although Riyadh had long sought to limit the power of Iraq, particularly under Saddam Hussein, who posed a strategic threat, it was equally concerned about the potential fragmentation of the Iraqi state. From the Saudi perspective, the disintegration of Iraq risked significantly enhancing Iran's regional influence, especially if Shia-majority areas aligned more closely with Tehran. Hence, Saudi policy in post-invasion Iraq became increasingly defensive. Rather than proactively advancing its own regional vision, Riyadh focused on countering scenarios that could empower Iran (Gause, 2014). This included opposition to sectarian fragmentation and to the growing influence of Shia political groups and militias linked to Iran. For that reason, the Saudi leadership, grounded in a conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, favored the emergence of a strong, centralized Sunni-led government in Baghdad that could serve as a counterbalance to Iran and preserve Iraq's territorial integrity (Wehrey, 2014).

For Saudi Arabia, preventing the emergence of a new Iraq dominated by Shiite political forces was a top priority. The primary concern for Riyadh was that such a development would place Iraq firmly within Iran's sphere of influence, thereby amplifying Tehran's regional power. This outcome was perceived not merely as a material geopolitical challenge but also as an ideational domestic threat, given Saudi Arabia's own marginalized Shiite minority concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Accordingly, a Shiite-led Iraq, closely aligned with Iran, could potentially embolden Saudi Shiite communities, intensify sectarian tensions and undermining the internal cohesion and security of the Saudi regime (Wehrey, 2014; Gause, 2010). These concerns were further shaped by broader fears of a Shiite crescent stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, a notion that signaled to Sunni Arab leaders the potential reconfiguration of regional power along sectarian lines (Haji-yousefi, 2009; Valbjorn and Bank, 2007).

One of the Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives in Iraq was to prevent the emergence of a pluralistic and democratic republic, which could serve as a countermodel to the Kingdom's monarchical system. The establishment of a successful democratic regime in Iraq would pose a potential ideological and political challenge to the authoritarian structures prevalent in the Gulf monarchies. However, the US' failure to foster a stable and functional democratic government in post-2003 Iraq led to a strategic shift toward crisis management rather than institutional reform. This shift inadvertently alleviated external pressures on Saudi Arabia to pursue political reforms of its own (Gause, 2010). As the situation in Iraq deteriorated, Washington began to prioritize stability over democratization, increasingly favoring so-called responsible authoritarian leaders over the promotion of liberal democratic governance (Dağ, 2016). This pragmatic recalibration of the US foreign policy had the unintended consequence of legitimizing the Saudi model of governance within the context of regional security concerns (Carothers and Ottaway, 2004).

Consequently, the US and Saudi Arabia intensified their joint efforts to contain Iran's expanding influence in Iraq and the broader Gulf region. Nonetheless, the US-led invasion of Iraq not only facilitated Tehran's regional ascendancy but also generated destabilizing ripple effects that threatened the domestic security and political continuity of several GCC states. These developments sowed deep mistrust between Washington and its Gulf allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, prompting these countries to adopt a more cohesive regional security posture (Seale, 2004). Hence, in response to perceived threats, particularly from Iran, the Saudi Arabia-led Gulf Arab states initiated efforts to establish a new security architecture aimed at safeguarding their interests and ensuring regime stability (Çetinoğlu, 2010; 97-98).

Despite periodic strains in their relationship with the US, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states maintained a close strategic partnership with Washington in the early 21st century, largely due to renewed concerns over Iran's regional behavior following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 (Barzegar, 2010; Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007). One of the most alarming developments under his presidency was the immediate announcement that Iran would resume uranium enrichment, thereby escalating tensions over its nuclear ambitions (Guzansky, 2010; Perkovich et. al., 2012). Iran's controversial nuclear program quickly became a focal point of concern for the US and its Gulf allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, which viewed a nuclear-armed Iran as a direct threat to regional stability and the balance of power in the Gulf. This development not only heightened anxieties over Tehran's strategic intentions but also intensified the geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly in proxy conflicts across the wider Middle East (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007; Mabon, 2016).

Thereby the tentative detente of the 1990s between Iran and Saudi Arabia gave way to an era of heightened rivalry. In the new era, Saudi Arabia, increasingly alarmed by Iran's growing influence, began offering more overt support to Sunni factions in Iraq. In response, Iran expanded its ties with various Shiite militias and Kurdish parties to shape the trajectory of the emerging Iraqi political order (Nasr, 2006; Eisenstadt et. al., 2011). The situation further deteriorated in 2008 when the US declared its intention to withdraw from Iraq. By the time the US completed its withdrawal in December 2011, the power vacuum had enabled Iran to further consolidate its influence in Iraq, exacerbating tensions with Riyadh and fueling a broader regional struggle for dominance (Wehrey, et al. 2009). In this context, the 2003 invasion marked a turning point in Gulf geopolitics, prompting a reassessment of regional security dynamics. With Iraq no longer serving as a geopolitical counterweight, Saudi Arabia and its allies confronted a landscape in which Iran emerged as the dominant regional actor, thereby reshaping the contours of the regional power politics.

Conclusion

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq constituted a profound structural rupture in the Gulf regional security complex, transforming both the material distribution of power and the ideational foundations of regional politics. Far from representing a temporary disruption, the war dismantled one of the central pillars of the pre-2003 Gulf security order. Iraq's removal as a functioning security pole fundamentally altered the polarity of the regional system, eroding the unstable tripolar configuration that had previously structured threat perceptions and moderated patterns of securitization among regional actors. This structural transformation generated a permissive environment for new forms of regional competition, intensifying insecurity across multiple sectors.

Against this backdrop, one of the most immediate consequences of this rupture was the emergence of new political actors in post-invasion Iraq, many of whom maintained close ideological, organizational, and strategic ties with Iran. For Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states, this development was interpreted not merely as a shift in Iraq's internal political balance but as a broader regional realignment with significant security implications. Moreover, the prospect of Iraq evolving into a second Shia-led state in the region heightened anxieties within Gulf Arab monarchies, where sectarian identities have long intersected with regime security and societal cohesion. These concerns were particularly acute in the Gulf Arab states with significant Shia populations, as they reinforced fears of ideological diffusion, political mobilization, and foreign influence.

As these anxieties intensified, the post-2003 period witnessed a marked escalation in societal and political securitization across the Gulf. Sectarian narratives became increasingly embedded in elite threat constructions, functioning as powerful interpretive frames through which regional developments were understood and politicized. Importantly, however, sectarianism did not operate as an autonomous driver of conflict. Rather, it acted as an amplifying mechanism that reinforced pre-existing structural rivalries within the evolving security complex. Thus, the interaction between structural competition and ideational securitization proved central to the consolidation of a more conflict-prone regional order.

In parallel with these ideational shifts, the erosion of tripolarity following Iraq's collapse accelerated the transformation of the Gulf into a bipolar security complex centered on Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the absence of Iraq as a balancing actor, the triangular dynamics that had previously constrained escalation gave way to a more rigid and polarized configuration of security interdependence. As a result, this new structure was characterized by heightened mutual suspicion, persistent fears of military escalation, and the deepening of alliance commitments within opposing camps. Furthermore, the resulting bipolar rivalry was not confined to the military sector but extended across political, societal, and ideological domains, producing a dense web of securitization processes that reinforced regional instability.

At the same time, external penetration further compounded these dynamics. Specifically, the US-led intervention in Iraq not only reshaped the internal balance of the region but also entrenched the Gulf's position as a highly penetrated regional security complex. Global powers became integral to regional threat calculations, influencing alliance behavior and shaping the strategic options available to local actors. While external involvement provided certain states with security guarantees, it simultaneously reduced incentives for regional accommodation and contributed to the persistence of zero-sum security logics. In this way, the interaction between bipolar regional rivalry and sustained external penetration thus constrained regional agency and limited the prospects for durable de-securitization.

Taken together, these developments underscore the importance of structural change in shaping regional security outcomes. The post-2003 Gulf order illustrates how shifts in polarity can fundamentally reconfigure patterns of securitization and alliance formation, generating enduring effects that extend well beyond the initial shock of systemic transformation. Accordingly, the emergence of a conflictual bipolarity in place of an unstable tripolar arrangement demonstrates how the removal of a key regional pole can exacerbate insecurity by eliminating moderating mechanisms and intensifying threat perceptions across multiple sectors. More broadly, the Gulf case reinforces the analytical utility of RSCT in explaining the persistence and evolution of regional insecurity. It

highlights how regional security is simultaneously shaped by historically embedded patterns of enmity and continually renegotiated through changing alignments, evolving threat perceptions, and the interplay between regional and global forces. Ultimately, the post-Iraq War transformation of the Gulf thus offers a compelling illustration of how material and ideational factors interact to security security complexes over time.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu çalışma, 2003 Irak Savaşı sonrasında Körfez bölgesinin güvenlik mimarisinde meydana gelen dönüşümü, Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi (BGKT) çerçevesinde analiz etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, 2003 yılında Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) öncülüğünde gerçekleştirilen Irak işgali, yalnızca Irak'ın iç siyasal ve kurumsal yapısını değil, aynı zamanda Körfez'in savaş öncesinde görece istikrarlı kabul edilen güvenlik dengesini de köklü biçimde sarsmıştır. Özellikle işgalin, bölgedeki güç dağılımını yeniden şekillendirmesi; yeni tehdit algılarının, ittifak örüntülerinin ve rekabet dinamiklerinin ortaya çıkmasına yol açması, Körfez bölgesel güvenlik sisteminde yapısal bir kırılmaya işaret etmektedir. Dolayısıyla çalışma, Irak Savaşı'nı Körfez Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi'nin üç kutuplu bir yapıdan iki kutuplu bir düzene evrilmesinde belirleyici bir dönüm noktası olarak ele almaktadır.

Bu dönüşümün daha iyi anlaşılabilmesi için öncelikle 2003 öncesi dönemin bölgesel güvenlik yapısına bakmak gerekmektedir. Nitekim söz konusu dönemde Körfez bölgesel düzeni, Irak, İran ve Suudi Arabistan merkezli üç kutuplu bir güç dengesi üzerine inşa edilmişti. Her ne kadar bu yapı yüksek düzeyde güvenlikleştirme ve rekabet barındırsa da, üç aktör arasındaki karşılıklı dengeleme ilişkileri sayesinde görece öngörülebilir bir istikrar üretmekteydi. Bu çerçevede Irak, İran ile Suudi Arabistan arasındaki jeopolitik ve ideolojik rekabeti kısmen sınırlayan işlevsel bir üçüncü kutup olarak bölgesel güvenlik dinamiklerinde kritik bir rol üstlenmekteydi. Ancak 2003 işgaliyle birlikte Irak'ın bu dengeleyici rolünü yitirmesi, bölgesel güvenlik mimarisinin temel dayanaklarından birinin ortadan kalkmasına neden olmuştur.

Bu noktadan itibaren, Irak'ın iç yapısında meydana gelen dönüşüm, bölgesel düzeydeki güç ilişkilerini doğrudan etkilemiştir. İşgal sonrasında Irak'ta yaşanan devlet kapasitesinin çöküşü, kurumsal zayıflama ve yaygın fraksiyonel şiddet, ülkeyi etkin bir bölgesel aktör olmaktan uzaklaştırmıştır. Bununla birlikte bu süreç, İran'ın Irak üzerindeki siyasal, askerî ve toplumsal nüfuzunu genişletmesine imkân tanıyan elverişli bir stratejik ortam yaratmıştır. Özellikle İran'ın Şii siyasal aktörler ve silahlı gruplar üzerinden Irak'ta artan etkisi, yalnızca Irak iç siyasetini değil, Körfez genelindeki tehdit algılarını da derinden etkilemiştir. Bu nedenle Suudi Arabistan ve diğer Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi (KİK) üyesi ülkeler, İran'ın Irak'ı bir nüfuz alanına dönüştürmesini kendi ulusal güvenlikleri açısından doğrudan ve varoluşsal bir tehdit olarak değerlendirmiştir. Sonuç olarak bu durum, İran ile Suudi Arabistan arasındaki güvenlik ikilemini keskinleştirerek bölgesel kutuplaşmayı derinleştirmiştir.

Bu gelişmeler ışığında, 2003 sonrası dönemde Körfez'deki ittifak yapılarında ve güvenlikleştirme örüntülerinde belirgin bir dönüşüm yaşandığı görülmektedir. BGKT perspektifinden bakıldığında, Irak'ın bölgesel güvenlik kompleksindeki işlevsel rolünü kaybetmesi, daha önce üçlü yapı içinde kısmen dengelenen İran-Suudi Arabistan rekabetini doğrudan ve yoğun bir ikili kutuplaşmaya dönüştürmüştür. Ortaya çıkan bu iki kutuplu yapı içinde İran, bölgesel nüfuz kapasitesi açısından Suudi Arabistan'a kıyasla daha avantajlı bir konuma ulaşmıştır. Dahası bu avantaj, yalnızca Irak ile sınırlı kalmamış Lübnan, Suriye ve Yemen gibi diğer bölgesel ülkelerde kesişerek Körfez güvenlik gündemini çok katmanlı bir rekabet alanına dönüştürmüştür.

Buna karşılık, İran'ın artan bölgesel etkinliği Suudi Arabistan ve KİK ülkelerini dengeleme arayışlarına yöneltmiştir. Bu kapsamda söz konusu aktörler, güvenlik stratejilerini büyük ölçüde ABD ile olan ilişkilerini derinleştirme yönünde şekillendirmiştir. Bu durum, Körfez'in uzun süredir nüfuz edilmiş bir bölgesel güvenlik kompleksi olma özelliğini sürdürdüğünü göstermektedir. Nitekim her ne kadar BGKT, güvenlik gündemlerinin esas olarak bölge içi aktörler tarafından üretildiğini vurgulasa da, Körfez örneği dış güçlerin bölgesel hizalanmalar ve güvenlikleştirme süreçleri üzerindeki belirleyici etkisini açık biçimde ortaya koymaktadır. Bununla birlikte, 2003 sonrası dönemde ABD'nin bölgeye yönelik stratejik önceliklerinde ortaya çıkan belirsizlik ve tutarsızlık, Körfez'deki iki kutuplu yapının daha da kırılgan ve muğlak bir karakter kazanmasına yol açmıştır.

Tam da bu noktada, söz konusu stratejik belirsizlik ortamının bölge ülkelerinin davranışlarını nasıl etkilediği önem kazanmaktadır. Nitekim Suudi Arabistan ve Körfez Arap müttefikleri bu süreçte güvenlik politikalarını çeşitlendirmeye ve alternatif ortaklıklar geliştirmeye yönelmiştir. Yerel askerî kapasitenin artırılması, savunma sanayii yatırımları ve bölge içi iş birliği mekanizmalarının güçlendirilmesi bu dönemde öne çıkan eğilimler arasında yer almıştır. Aynı zamanda Çin'in bölgedeki ekonomik varlığını derinleştirmesi ve giderek diplomatik bir aktör olarak öne çıkması, küresel çok kutupluluk ile bölgesel iki kutupluluğun kesiştiği hibrit bir güvenlik yapısının ortaya çıkmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Bu çerçevede 2023 yılında Suudi Arabistan ile İran arasında Çin arabuluculuğunda gerçekleşen normalleşme süreci, söz konusu küresel-bölgesel etkileşimin somut bir göstergesi olarak değerlendirilebilir.

Bu genel çerçeve içinde değerlendirildiğinde, Irak'ın dengeleyici üçüncü kutup olarak ortadan kalkması, rekabetin sıfır toplamlı niteliğini daha da güçlendirmiştir. Bunun doğal sonucu olarak mezhepsel ve ideolojik ayrışmalar derinleşmiş askerî ve toplumsal güvenlik sektörlerinde yoğun güvenlikleştirme süreçleri baskın hâle gelmiştir. Buna rağmen mevcut düzenin akışkan ve istikrarsız karakteri, tamamen çatışmacı bir yapıya mahkûm olmadığını da göstermektedir. Aksine, sınırlı da olsa güvenlik dışılaştırma girişimleri, seçici diplomatik angajmanlar ve pragmatik yeniden hizalanmalar için belirli bir alan varlığını sürdürmüştür. Bu yönüyle Körfez'in Irak Savaşı sonrası evrilen güvenlik düzeni, BGKT'nin hem bölge içi dinamiklerin belirleyiciliğine hem de dış müdahalelerin dönüştürücü etkisine ilişkin temel varsayımlarını doğrular niteliktedir.

Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, BGKT ve süreç izleme yöntemi aracılığıyla Körfez bölgesinde üç kutupluluktan iki kutupluluğa geçişi tetikleyen temel mekanizmaları ortaya koymaktadır. Her ne kadar 2003 sonrası Körfez güvenlik sistemi güç merkezleri açısından daha yoğunlaşmış görünse de, süregelen rekabetler, derin güvenlikleştirme örüntüleri ve dış aktörlere olan yapısal bağımlılık nedeniyle kalıcı bir istikrara ulaşamamıştır. Bu dönüşümün analizi, modern Körfez siyasetinin iç dinamikleri ile küresel güç dengeleri arasındaki etkileşimi anlamak açısından önemli içgörüler sunarken, aynı zamanda bölgeye özgü, daha kapsayıcı ve yerel temelli güvenlik mekanizmalarına duyulan ihtiyacı da açık biçimde ortaya koymaktadır.