

# The regional security dynamics of the Gulf Region Post-2011

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## **Abstract:**

*Regional security complex theory (RSCT) analyses the regional dynamics of power and security from different levels of analysis than the norm that discusses either the international, state, or individual levels. It adds value to the dynamics of power and security, as it focuses on three issues: geographical proximity – as opposed to looking at problems on an international scale, penetration of great powers, and patterns of enmity and amity. This paper focuses on the Gulf region as a security sub complex within a regional security complex which is the Middle East. This can be shown through the increasing security interdependence between the Levant and the Gulf.*

*The research question posed by this paper is to ask how the regional security dynamics of the region were affected by the Arab Uprisings and its repercussions. This paper argues that the security interdependence increased between the Gulf and the Levant after 2011 due to the emerging developments in the region such as the changing balance of power, changing patterns of enmity and amity, and the external power penetration. The paper will be divided into three sections. The first section will tackle the material structure of the region. The second section tackles the patterns of enmity and amity between key states in the region. The third section tackles the penetration of external powers such as the United States directly and Russia indirectly.*

## **Keywords:**

*Regional security, Gulf, Regional Security Complex Theory, GCC*

## **Introduction:**

The Middle East has witnessed different changes such as establishing new actors, the proliferation of non-state actors, and the emergence of new issues. These changes affected the regional order, it witnessed different shapes due to the changing perceptions of the threats. The implications of the evolution of the security complex of the Middle East are due to different factors such as domestic changes and instability which resulted in civil wars and revolutions, the expansion of non-Arab states such as Iran and Turkey through proxy forces, or non-state actors and the last factor which is the international level that tackles the changing role of the US and the re-emergence of the great powers such as Russia (Koch, 2019).

The application of the definition of the security complex on the Middle East as a region that consists of the states whose primary security concerns are linked together. Buzan and Weaver classified the Middle East into three subcomplexes as a half level within the region which are the Levant, the Maghreb, and the Gulf. The Levant is centered between Israel and the Arab states and this subcomplex was created due to the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians which was reflected in the hostility between Israel and the rest of its neighbour states. The second subcomplex is the Maghreb, it was described by Buzan and Weaver as a weak subcomplex that revolves around the shifting of the relations among Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. The last subcomplex which is the main focus of the paper is the Gulf which refers to the rivalry between Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf states (Koch & Stivachtis, 2019).

The Gulf region contributed to the security dynamics of the Middle East, especially after 2011. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of the Gulf in the security complex of the region which can be shown in changing the coalitions and alliances in the region, the distribution of power, and the balance of power. This can be tackled through the research question which is “how the regional security dynamics of the region were affected by the Arab Uprisings and its repercussions”. This paper argues that the security interdependence increased between the Gulf and the Levant after 2011 due to the emerging developments in the region such as the changing balance of power, changing patterns of enmity and amity, and the external power penetration. The paper will be divided into three sections. The first section tackles the material structure of the region which can be shown through the key regional powers and the distribution of power within the region. The second section discusses the changing patterns of

enmity and amity between key states in the region by focusing on Iran and Saudi Arabia. The third section tackles the penetration of external powers such as the United States directly and Russia indirectly.

#### Literature review:

The literature on the topic can be divided into four strands. These are presented as follows. The first strand discusses the scholarly attempts to revisit the security dynamics in the Middle East by using the regional security complex theory post the Arab uprisings. The second strand discusses the regional security in the Middle East and the patterns of change in regional alliances before 2011. The third strand discusses the external power penetration in the region due to their interests such as the US, Russia, China, and the EU specifically the “E3” Britain, France, and Germany, and how they shaped the security dynamics of the Middle East. The fourth strand is related to the most important security threats in the region that led to instability such as armed conflicts, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation, and the problematic role of non-Arab regional states such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

The first key strand includes the previous scholarly attempts about revisiting the regional security complex of the Middle East post-2011. Del Sarto (2019) and Santini (2017) tackled the security complex of the Middle East by referring to historical and comparative analysis of the region. Del Sarto mentioned that the region post-2011 has witnessed different changes that affected the regional order. On the other hand, Santini mentioned that the region witnessed a new regional cold war that includes two blocks. The first block refers to the Saudi-led Sunni bloc against an Iran-led Shia bloc. The second bloc includes the intra-Sunni cleavage. The increasing rivalry between KSA and Iran led to increasing the ambition of different regional powers to impose their power such as Turkey. Furthermore, Bilgin (2019) and Cannon and Donelli (2019) focused on the changing alliances and their effect on regional security. Bilgin tackled changes and differences in security through comparative analysis of the past (during the cold war) and the present (post-cold war). On the other side, Cannon and Donelli mentioned that regional systems can be changed and reshaped more than the global systems which are closed. However, any change in the international system can lead to instability. Therefore, they emphasized the importance of integrating the Horn of Africa regional security complex to the Middle East regional security complex.

The second strand tackles the patterns of change in the regional alliances in the Middle East before 2011. The changes in the security alliances in the region can be tackled with the increasing presence of the US after the first gulf war which affected the regional alliances. Marquis, Perry, Mejia, Sollinger & Narang (2015), Bennett, Lepgold & Unger (1994), and Halliday (1991) argued that the US enhanced a strong military coalition in the region such as its military help to KSA to encounter Iran. They also mentioned that the region did not witness only bipolar conflict, it witnessed interlocked conflicts such as Arab-Israeli, Iran-Iraq, Iraq-Saudi Arabia, Saudi-Yemeni, and Moroccan-Algerian. In addition, De Vita (2019) and Fernández (2014) argued that the region has witnessed three waves of shock and one of them was during the invasion of Iraq which was followed by liquidity in alliances, especially after 9/11 which contributed to the rise of Iran that allied with Iraq. This fluidity in alliances contributed to the transition to a unipolar system to adjust to the US policies. So, the roles of external powers are key determinants of patterns of alliances.

The third strand in the literature tackles the question of the external power penetration in the region post-2011. There are several scholars such as Jeffrey and Eisenstadt (2016), Wood (2019), and Jones (2018), that talked about the role and interests of the US in the region post-2011. They argued that the US interests represented in enhancing its hegemony and global power which can be shown through its inclusion in direct and indirect conflicts in the region. In addition, to enhance its global capital through the adaption of security partnerships with key regional states through economic, political, and cultural ties such as Egypt and Israel. It worked on establishing friendly relations with regional states such as Saudi Arabia to ensure and secure its access and its allies in the region. They agreed that the Arab uprisings were one of the reasons for the threats to the region and the US military interventions represented a tool for securing its interests and international security. On the other hand, Rumer (2019) and Magen (2013) argued that Russia has an interest in the region as it was always trying to revive the idea of the domination of the Soviet Union to expand its power. Thus, the Arab uprisings represented a chance to be presented and included in the region by maintaining its relations with different states in the region and for benefiting from the growing anti-American sentiments in the region. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the US troops from Syria based on the decision of Trump in October 2019, gave a chance for Russia to rise as a military and diplomatic actor through its intervention in Syria after the Arab uprisings. On the other side, according to Lons, Fulton, Sun, and Al-Tamimi (2019), although China might not work on increasing its security presence in the region, its threats represented in

supporting regional powers indirectly which threatens the stability of the region such as its selling weapon technology to Iran and facilitating the Iranian destabilizing activities in the region.

The fourth strand in the literature tackles different types of threats in the region such as armed conflicts, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation, and the threats that are imposed by non-Arab regional states such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The question of the key and important security threats in the region can be tackled as follows. Nuclear proliferation is considered one of the most dominant threats in the region. As Krepinovich (2013) and Lewis (2013) argued nuclear weapons can be used as a tool to achieve states' interests through using the deterrence concept and to preserve regional stability. One of the motives for using nuclear weapons is the idea of the unsolved conflicts in the Middle East. As Ostovar, Edelston, and Connel (2013) mentioned that this was clear in the case of the Iranian nuclear program which shows the radicalization of the Iranian policy through supporting Shi'a and using covert operations to respond to its enemies. Furthermore, they mentioned that some states in the region have nuclear weapons, however, they are running in secrecy such as Israel which led to the destabilization of the region. Another form of threat in the region is armed conflict such as in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. According to Ryan (2014), and Smith (2016) divisions were one of the main factors for the armed conflict whether between the Arab states, the intra-Arab or Inter-Arab divisions. This can be clear after the Arab uprisings that led to a vacuum in inter-Arab relations as there were no regional centers of power instead chaos, civil wars, and insurgency. Therefore, some regional powers raised and imposed their regional politics such as KSA and others became a source of influence such as Qatar. As a result, there was a proxy conflict between KAS and Qatar that was clear in their support of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements in Egypt. These divisions were not on the basis of primordial hatred instead of the material and the ideational struggle for power. Furthermore, the rise of terrorism was one of the prominent threats after 2011. This can be shown through the rise of different terrorist groups such as ISIS, and the consolidation of other terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. As Jenkins (2017) and Byman (2015) argued that these groups considered the region as a safe place for them such as Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The main threat imposed by these groups is not in terms of how they are operated instead transition into insurgencies or quasi-state

On the other hand, the non-Arab powers represented a threat to the region whether it is part of the Middle East as Iran or Israel or is not part of it based on Buzan's map of the Middle East such as Turkey. Regarding Israeli policies toward the region, as Asseburg and Henkel (2021), Robbins (2021), Sachs, and Huggard (2020) argued that the normalization of Israeli relationship with other regional states represents a cold peace. They mentioned that this normalization does not mean that the region is moving towards achieving stability due to the protracted conflicts that are still unsolved. On the other hand, according to Chubin (2012), Fulton (2011), Marhoon (2017), Khan (2015), and Ayman (2013), Iran after 2011 worked on framing itself as an alternative regional manager. Therefore, it worked on reducing the exploitative regional order by weakening the allies of the US and by financially supporting Shi'ite proxy militias. It worked on increasing its expansions by supporting its Shi'ite militias such as in Yemen and Syria. Also, they argued that Turkey became one of the regional dominant actors in the Middle East in the 21st century which was different from its foreign policy in the past. There was a shift from being cautious and isolated from the region to play an active role in the region. It benefited from the international and regional balance of power in the region which made it follow a new active foreign policy in the region. The increasing involvement of Turkey was due to the efforts of the AKP government to reconceptualize the Turkish identity.

The focus of the literature review was on specific events, conflicts, and specific categories of threats and was limited to the regional security complex in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. It was focusing on comparing the change in regional alliances before 2011 and post-2011 which did not give more focus after 2011. Therefore, the significance of the research is to revisit the Middle East as a security region post-2011 that includes Turkey in the Middle East which is excluded from the region according to Buzan's and Weaver's map of the Middle East. This paper focuses on the Gulf as a subcomplex due to its importance in influencing the security complex in the region.

This is shown through focusing on studying the region in terms of the system level of analysis which includes a comprehensive focus on regional power or great power policy towards the region such as giving more focus on the role of the EU in the region and analyzing the regional security complex in terms of the securitization approach.

### **Theoretical framework:**

The regional security complex theory aims to understand the new structures, the balance of power, and the relations among the states regionally and globally. Its main idea revolves around the ease of the traveling of the threats over short distances than the long distances and the security interdependence which is framed based on clusters which are

the security complexes. The formation of the theory is based on the interplay between the anarchic structure and its balance of power and the pressures of geographical proximity. The theory uses the constructivist builds on the securitization theory and the materialist approaches based on the idea of the distribution of power (Koch & Stivachtis, 2019).

The main variables of the theory are the following. First, it emphasizes the social construction which refers to the pattern of amity and enmity among the states as for their existence, they have to establish security interdependence. Second, it tackles the anarchic structure by depending on the interplay between the anarchic structure, the distribution of power within the region, and its balance of power consequences and geographical proximity that generates more security interaction between neighbors. The third refers to the external power penetration. The effects of super-great power penetration can be reflected in the pattern of rivalry, the balance of power, and alliance patterns among the main powers within the region (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

### **Conceptual framework:**

These concepts are regions and security regions, the Middle East, and security.

### **Regions and Security Regions:**

The definition of the region is contested. It can be defined in terms of homogeneous regions or in terms of security. As a geographical term, it was defined as a broad geographical and administrative area that is characterized by similar features (Tavares, 2004, p. 4). On the other hand, it was defined in terms of its broader term as a territory, province, district, or administrative area or in terms of its geographical meaning as a territorial entity that has its own geographical structure and is different from other units (Dejan, Renata, Sofija, & Darko, 2015, p. 71). Also, it was defined by Herbertson as a methodological aspect for creating a "systematic geography" (Contel, 2015, p. 449). Vidal de la Blache and Lucien Gallois defined it by uniting natural and human aspects in their regional studies (Contel, 2015, p. 450). However, it was defined according to Buzan and Weaver in terms of a security region by outside powers. It refers to the weak units to generate security interdependence on a regional level. It is an autonomous regional level of security that operates strongly despite the interventions of the global powers (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 43). The paper adopts the definition of the security region by Buzan and Weaver as the Middle East which does not stress regional homogeneity.

### **Middle East:**

With regard to the concept of the Middle East, its concept comes under the security region. It is contested in terms of considering it as a region and what are the states that are included in the Middle East. The Middle East was defined as an inclusive term as "The Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) that adds Turkey, Israel, and Iran to the Arab world (Zaccara & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 14). Also, it was defined in terms of a broader concept including Afghanistan and Pakistan (Zaccara & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 14). Buzan and Weaver considered it as a pattern of security interdependence that expanded from Morocco to Iran and includes the Arab world, Iran, and Israel. He considered Turkey and Iran as insulators (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 187). This paper adopts Buzan's delineation of the Middle East as a security region and this delineation will be revisited through Buzan's map of the Middle East.

### **Security:**

The definition of security is contested. It has different interpretations as being classified into soft and hard security threats or human and states' security. The hard security threats can be defined as being responsive to external threats, it responds to the actual use of military force, it is being depth-based and structured geographically. In contrast, the soft security threats can be defined as responses to the internal threat, it uses efficient internal management of society with a pronounced conflict-preventive dimension, it is width based and its response capacity is policy-priority based (Fatić, 2002). On the other side, the concept of security was defined as being socially constructed through securitizing issues which can be considered as a threat to the survival of a referent object (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 71). The paper tackles the construction of threats through the constructivist approach that was embraced by RSCT, to show how key states in the region perceive certain issues as security threats whether they are hard or soft security threats and whether they are regarding the state or other referent objects.

**Methodology:**

This research will be based on deductive research by examining the theory which is the regional security complex theory on the gulf region post-2011. The analytical tools will be the following, the securitization approach in terms of the perception of threats. The research uses secondary resources such as academic journals, books, and academic articles.

**The material structure of the Gulf region:**

According to Buzan, the Gulf region is a security complex that was formed based on amity and enmity among the states which ranged from historical, religious, cultural, social, and economic matters. As there is a mutual security complex dependency in the Gulf, however, there is a security competition among the following triangle Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and a limited influence by the rest of the Gulf states such as Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, and Bahrain. The security of the region was affected by the external powers as it increased the regional competition with regard to security (Heirannia, 2018).

The Arab uprisings changed the regional landscape which was reflected in the distribution of power, the regional powers, and the security dynamics. The Arab uprisings gave a chance for the Gulf to have an effective role especially after being one of the least integrated regions in the world. This can be shown by increasing the security interdependence between the Levant and the Gulf. Also, the retreat of some regional actors led to giving a chance to other players from the Gulf to actively influence the events. For instance, Qatar was one of the states that supported the protests and followed the interventionism policies such as its support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The UAE was neutral, it supported the regime change at the beginning and at the same time contained its repercussions such as the instability. On the other hand, the KSA was cautious at the beginning, then it followed an aggressive revisionist approach (Gaub, 2015).

To achieve security and stability in the region, the Gulf states established the Gulf Cooperation Council which includes the Gulf states. The role of the GCC on the security level is to the promotion of the material well-being of the people and their participation in political life. Although the GCC worked on promoting a broad concept of security, it lacked other aspects such as lacking a technological base and a dependency on foreign arms. This can be a reason for increasing the presence of the external powers (Wizarat, 1987).

A new regional cold war emerged in 2006 and reached to its peak with the Hezbollah-Israeli war and the sectarian turn of the civil war in Iraq which was considered an attempt by KSA and Iran to balance each other. The new regional cold war led to the formation of regional heterogeneity which is characterized by multiple power rankings, actors, and levels of governance. The major state that threatens the stability of the Gulf is Iran (Santin, 2017). As a result of the new regional cold war, the region witnessed a new regional order and the Gulf benefited from it through its hard and soft powers such as the case of the support of Qatar to the Muslim brotherhood. The Gulf states such as UAE and Qatar due to their great defense and security capacities were able to impose their hard power in the conflicting areas such as in Syria Libya and Yemen (Jacobs, 2020).

The other two important states in the region are KSA and UAE. The role can be clear in dealing with the Iranian threat "While Saudi Arabia and the UAE often portray their regional strategy as a reaction to Iran's expanding regional influence and the threat it poses to Arab Gulf states, they have failed to leverage this threat perception into effective regional balancing against Iran" (Hazbun, 2018). They failed to achieve the balance because each side works to achieve its domination in the region. This can be shown through their cold war and their use of proxies such as the support of Iran to Houthis in Yemen to threaten Saudi security.

**Amity and enmity of the states in the Gulf:**

The repercussions of the Arab uprisings played a role in the spite among the states in the Gulf. This can be shown in the antagonism and amity among the states. The effect of the antagonism can be reflected on Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen due to the antagonism between Qatar and Islamic forces on one side, and the reactionary forces such as KSA and UAE on the other side. All Gulf states share the following characteristics, all of them are feudal monarchies, Sunni Islam is the official religion for these states and the revenues are from the resources especially oil (Gaub, 2015).



North Africa represented an area of competition among the Gulf states, especially after the Arab uprisings. This was clear in the division among Gulf states in 2014 and the boycott of Qatar in 2017. This division represented was between a Saudi-UAE axis and a Qatari axis. According to RSCT that the threats affected the geographical proximity, the revolts in Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern province were an alarm to KSA and the rest of the Gulf region as Iran was supporting the Shia population in the two states. Also, the expansion of the monarchical axis reached the Levant and Maghreb and the counter-revolutionary efforts were led by the Saudis. The victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia was met by the freezing and preventing the fund by KSA to the two states. Due to the support of Qatar the Muslim brotherhood, the following Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait) prevented their ambassadors from Doha between March and November 2014. Moreover, the divisions among the Gulf states represented in the second Qatari crisis that began in 2017 when the following states (KSA, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) took action against Doha and declared a de facto blockade on it. However, Qatar was supported by Turkey by sending military forces to it. The escalation of the crisis by KSA and UAE led Iran to work on reaching Oman and Kuwait besides Qatar which affects the cohesion of the Gulf region (Santin, 2017).

The antagonism between Iran and KSA can be shown through the perception of threats to each other. The Saudi perception of Iran was reinforced when the US signed the nuclear deal with Iran which gave an impression to KSA the US is supporting Iran. This KSA to have an active foreign policy in Yemen and in the oil market to fill the vacuum that was left by the US. On the other hand, the Iranian perception of KSA was shaped by how KSA deals with the Shia minority. Iran perceived KSA as discriminating against Shia in Bahrain and KSA. In addition, Iran perceives the KSA policy of keeping the oil prices down as a way to restrict Iranian development. Both states are worried about each other regarding their interpretation of Islam as they perceive this as a threat to their ideological existence (Abbasi & Khan, 2016).

### **The effect of the external powers in the Gulf region:**

Gulf states share different interests with global powers such as the US, Russia and China and it was shifted after 2011. These interests reflected in the alliances with those powers as these interests can align and counter these powers. This can be shown through the decline of the traditional regional alliance and increasing the importance of proxy warfare. Also, these interests can be a tool to align with other regional powers such as normalizing the relationship with Israel and UAE, and Bahrain. When Trump came to power in 2016, he encouraged KSA to turn the region via interventions and expand its to other states such as Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine (Hazbun, 2018).

The relationship between the Gulf states was changing over time. However, they shared many interests, especially in energy security and preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons which was a threat to both of them. Also, they share strong economic ties, especially regarding the arms weapons sales and it was more than doubled in 2019 in the Middle East "Of the \$25.5 billion in deals made with the region in 2019, more than half were purchases from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait". They share broad security interests. The changes in the security relations between the US and KSA can be shown via the peace process, it was resisted by the Gulf states. Over time, the Gulf states supported Trump's peace plan for the Middle East to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In addition, KSA and UAE supported Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran emphasizing that Iran is the main reason for the instability in the region. Furthermore, the US and the Gulf states have worked on other different threats such as the support of the Gulf states to the intervention of NATO in Libya (Jacobs, 2020).

The relationship between Russia and the Gulf states deteriorated after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian role became less active. In the beginning, Russia did not want to compete with the US and the Europeans in the Gulf region, later on, Russia realized the importance of the Gulf to it especially in impacting the situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russia's new tendencies appeared after 2011. This can be shown through its support to Bahrain by selling the weapons. However, it criticized the Gulf states for their position in Syria for not supporting the Assad regime. Also, it criticized Qatar for its role in the Libyan crisis for violating the arms embargo and participating in military operations in Libya. The only state in the Gulf that had a good relationship with Russia is Bahrain due to its support for Shia, especially in Syria (Melkumyan, 2015). On the other hand, the relationship between the Gulf and China is based more on sharing economic interests. This can be clear after 2014 in the oil crisis and the decline of the oil prices, the states had realized the danger of depending on only one source of income and worked on finding other options "According to official economic reports, oil prices indeed decreased from about \$115 a barrel to less than \$50 in November 2016; 21 the largest drop since the 2008 economic crisis. After the release of their Economic Visions for the next years or decades, 22 Gulf and Arab States have therefore sought new ways to diversify their oil-

dependent economies.” (AlHasawi, 2020). Therefore, the new Silk Road was attractive because of the loans and the investments. Also, the Chinese investments in the region encouraged the state in the Middle East to strengthen their social stability. This shows that China has succeeded to exploit its economic advantages and soft power to have a strong relationship and presence in the Gulf and the Middle East as a whole.

### Conclusion:

The Middle East represents an important security complex region, especially after 2011. This affected the security dynamics of the region after 2011 which was reflected in changing the disruption of power, the balance of power, and the alliances based on the different security threats. Based on the security complex theory, the Middle East can be classified into three subcomplexes which are, the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Gulf. The Gulf represents an important subcomplex due to its security, economic and political importance. This can be shown through its great influence in the Middle East specifically the Levant. The application of RSCT on the Gulf can be based on three main variables. The first one is the disruption of power among the main states in the region. Second, is the degree of amity and enmity that formulate the relation between the Gulf states and the rest of the regional and external powers. Finally, the intervention of the external power in the region is based on the interest of each side. Although the Gulf region was classified by Buzan and Weaver as a subcomplex, its role in the security complex cannot be underestimated.

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