The Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies after 2011: redefining security perceptions and rethinking threat analysis.

Submitted by Bianco, C.

to the University of Exeter

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, a series of events – including popular upheavals, civil wars, the empowerment of non-state actors, economic volatility and increased geopolitical confrontation between states – hinted at the beginning of a transformative period for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Notwithstanding the region's modern history has provided several instances of treacherous conjunctures, seldom like in the aftermath of 2011 so many different challenges of different types have risen simultaneously on a regional and domestic scale. As this transformative wave spread towards the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), challenging the existing balance of power, the local regimes' security perceptions were profoundly impacted. Arguably, these became so substantially divergent at the level of each state that, in the span of only six years, the GCC was hit by two of the gravest internal political crises in its history. Hence, new questions emerged regarding the existence of a shared prioritization of threats and the interaction of endogenous and exogenous dangers when they materialize simultaneously, that don't seem to find answers in the existing body of scholarship yet. Focusing on the post-2011 environment and the issues emerged as crucial amid the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises, this thesis aims to provide new analytical tools for addressing such questions and enhancing the understanding of evolving security perceptions. In order to do so, drawing from the literatures of security studies and area studies, an original theoretical framework is elaborated, which introduces a distinction between threats and risks and a categorization system addressing the emergence of multidimensional, 'intermestic' threats. The framework is subsequently applied to perform an analysis of threat perceptions in each of the six GCC states. Finally, the author will attempt to draw conclusions on threat prioritization in the region and the status of the much-debated notion of 'Gulf security'.

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ARAMCO	Arabian American Oil Company
AQAP	Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula
CIFG	Counter-ISIS Finance Group
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FIU	Financial Intelligence Unit
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LNG	Liquified Natural Gas
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MP	Member of Parliament
NAC	National Action Charter
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units
QACA	Qatari Authority for Charitable Activities
QFC	Qatar Financial Center
QNA	Qatar News Agency
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar

1.0 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.

1.1 Emerging threats and polarization in the Gulf.

The year 2011 signaled the beginning of a transformative period for the geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, posing daunting challenges, simultaneously, to countries of the region. Popular political turmoil, economic instability, major geopolitical shifts and asymmetric military challenges rose in just few years as to create a perfect storm putting at risk the *status quo* crafted over decades in the region. Even the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, considered islands of stability, were heavily affected by such combination of game-changing events, that substantially put into question their existing perceptions of security and power dynamics in the region.

In January and February 2011 popular uprisings started in North Africa, triggering the most widespread revolutionary wave in the modern history of the MENA region, known as Arab Spring.[1] In little over a month protesters toppled the regimes of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Muhammad Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, both in power since the 1980s. These events had substantial reverberations in the entire region as they demonstrated that popular revolts might take down regimes historically considered bastions of stability. In Libya, aided by a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission, protests ousted the decades-old regime of Mu'ammar Qaddafi, hostile to the GCC. Further away, in Yemen, popular protests created the conditions to oust, in April 2011, the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power since 1990, as a rebel group known as Houthis, inimical of Riyadh and allegedly supported by Tehran, engaged in a campaign leading them to take the capital Sanaa in 2014.[2] Between 2011 and 2012, a full-fledged civil war reached the shores of Syria, after the Alawi regime of Bashar al-Assad took arms against predominantly Sunni protesters, and the international community chose not to intervene, neglecting pressures from the

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[1] Fawaz Gerges, (ed.) *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2013.
[2] Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts. "The war in Yemen." *Survival* 58.6 (2016): pp.157-186.

GCC countries.[3] As a result, the military intervention of Russia and Iran, a staunch ally of the al-Assad regime, advanced non-Arab influence in the Levant.[4] In the context of the Arabian Peninsula, these events inspired significant opposition rallies in Oman, Saudi Arabia's Eastern province and above all Bahrain, where in March 2011 the Sunni ruling family of al-Khalifa cracked down major protests by large groups within the Shi'a-majority population.[5] The Bahraini, Egyptian and Syrian cases had a long-term significance. The decision of the American administration not to stand by the Saudi and US allied Egyptian regime, to half-heartedly support the Bahraini regime and not to intervene in Syria, put into question in unprecedented ways the reliability of the United States as a partner to its regional allies, including those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).[6] Driven by this perception of a US retrenchment, some GCC countries resorted to an uncommon assertiveness and unilateralism.[7]

Saudi Arabia and Qatar resorted to unilateral moves to support conflicting anti-Assad forces.[8] In Egypt and Libya, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates joined forces to support anti-Islamist factions opposing the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned factions propped up by Qatar.[9] Fundamental intra-GCC disagreements escalated into the two gravest internal political crises in the GCC's history, in 2014 and 2017, featuring Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain breaking relations with Qatar.[10] In 2015, as he ascended to the royal palace, Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, launched a military campaign against the Houthis with the United Arab Emirates as his main ally. That same year the P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA) with Iran, an

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[3] Christopher Phillips. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new Middle East*. (Yale: Yale University Press), 2016.
[4] Ibid., pp. 147 - 170.
[5] Sean Yom and Gregory Gause. "Resilient royals: How Arab monarchies hang on." *Journal of Democracy* 23.4 (2012): pp. 74-88.
[6] Tim Niblock and Steve Hook, (eds), *The United States and the Gulf. Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*, (Berlin: Gerlach Press), 2015.
[7] Rory Miller. *Desert kingdoms to global powers: The rise of the Arab Gulf*. Yale University Press, 2016.
[8] Christopher Phillips "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria." *Middle East Policy*, 1.24 (2017): pp. 36-47.
[9] Mehran Kamrava. "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-led counterrevolution." *Orbis* 56.1 (2012): pp. 96-104.
[10] Cinzia Bianco and Gareth Stansfield. "The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011." *International Affairs* 94.3 (2018): pp. 613-635; Rory Miller, "Managing Regional Conflict: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Embargo of Qatar." *Global Policy* 10 (2019): pp. 36-45.

agreement that aimed to pave the way for the normalization of Tehran's position in the international community for the first time after the revolution that empowered the Islamic regime in 1979.[11] Quite interestingly, the agreement was reached thanks to the key mediating role of a GCC member, the Sultanate of Oman. Yet the agreement further brought to light the divergent positions on Iran within the GCC as in 2016 Saudi Arabia broke all relations with Iran following to the assaults of the Saudi diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad that took place after Riyadh executed the Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, leader of the 2011 protests against the Saudi regime in the Eastern Province, pushing all other GCC countries, except Oman, to take similar actions. [12]

In this context, the strategic chaos in Syria and Iraq allowed the rise between 2014 and 2015 of a new jihadist group, Daesh[13], that over few months managed to proclaim a new "Caliphate" in large sways of territory between the two countries, publicly declaring the annulment of the borders between them as drawn in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Daesh's rhetoric soon exposed its deep hostility and plans of destabilization for the Arabian Peninsula testified by a string of terrorist attacks in Eastern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 2015 and 2016.[14]

Meanwhile, since an historic peak on June 2014, when the Brent crude was sold at USD 115.19 per barrel, the oil price fell to below USD 30 in January 2016, a twelve-years nadir.[15] These prices put considerable pressure on the budgets of most GCC countries, where oil revenues account for between 80 and 90 percent

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[11] The JCPOA s an international agreement on the nuclear program of Iran reached in Vienna on 14 July 2015 between Iran and the UN Security Council's five permanent members (namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Germany (P5 +1), ending a decades-long international controversy between the USA and Iran. Its political implications in the region are analysed well in: Riham Bahi. "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement." *The International Spectator* 52.2 (2017): pp. 89-101.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Daesh is the Arab acronym for ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, currently the most active international jihadist organization in the Arab region. On its rise, see: Fawaz Gerges *Isis: A History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2017.

[14] Eman Ragab. "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS: threats, policies and challenges." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 9.4 (2016): pp. 577-595.

[15] Jillian Ambrose, "Oil prices may have 'bottomed out', says IEA", *The Telegraph*, 11 March 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/03/11/iea-oil-prices-may-have-bottomed-out/ (accessed 20 April 2017)

of total government revenues.[16] In order to respond to the fall of energy prices, all GCC governments have promoted economic policies that try to break away from the dependence on energy revenues, with inevitable impacts on their political economic "rentier" model: i.e. the idea that the state reallocates the externally-driven oil-and-gas-related rents it receives through government-granted privileges such as tax exemption, a very generous welfare and subsidy system and the assurance of getting a job in the public sector in exchange for unquestioned loyalty to the regimes.[17] As one end of this ruling bargain is put into question, the other may be threatened, too.

1.2 Aims of the thesis, research questions and structure.

Each of the events described above, and the global shifts in which they took place, have major security implications for the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. In fact, they have generated a securitization of the political discourse and domestic and external policies and stimulated more robust defence doctrines. In doing so, the GCC leaders have attempted an unprecedented step: to go from being security consumers to security producers.[18] The changing status of regional politics and the new course of the GCC states call upon the studies on regional security to evolve and keep the pace with the disruptive developments of the post-2011 environment. Given how the decision-making and policy-making processes in the Gulf monarchies is largely limited to a tight number of individuals, unpacking their leaderships' perceptions can be instrumental to decode an increasingly impactful policy behavior.[19] In this perspective, this thesis

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[16] "Oil and the Gulf States: After the Party," *The Economist*, 26 March 2016; "Total Natural Resource Rents (% of GDP)," *The World Bank*, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.TOTL.RT.ZS, (accessed 20 April 2017)

[17] The "rentier state system" is a political-economic system whose relative theory was expressed first in Hazem Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State: Nation, State and the Integration of the Arab World*, (London: Croom Helm), 1987. For a comprehensive review of the new economic policies see Kristian Ulrichsen, "The Politics of Economic Reform in Arab Gulf States", Center for the Middle East, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, June 2016.

[18] Jean-Marc Rickli. "New alliances dynamics in the Gulf and their impact on the small GCC states", *Third World Thematics*, 1:1, pp. 132-150.

[19] A comprehensive description of the process of policy-making in the Arab Gulf monarchies and the centrality of the leaders appears in Gregory Gause, "Understanding the Gulf States." *Democracy,* 36 (2015).

addresses the questions of how the policy-makers' definition of threats in the region has changed, what are the factors shaping their perceptions and prioritization, and how to use this information in analysing the short and medium term impacts on the security agenda of the regimes of the Arabian Peninsula. In doing so, it attempts to provide tools for enhancing the understanding of afore-mentioned, and other, security and political trends in the wider MENA region as well.

The main research question will be: how has the interpretation of the notion of threat evolved after 2011 at the level of each of the GCC regimes? In the process of answering this question, other issues will spontaneously arise. Is there still a shared understanding of the idea of Gulf security and a shared prioritization of threats among the GCC regimes? Did new threats emerge in addition, substitution or modification to traditional ones? How do endogenous and exogenous threats interact when they materialize contemporarily at the global, regional and domestic levels? How can threats be categorized when so many emerge from different sources? What is the impact of these evolutions on the GCC countries' relations among themselves and with other regional actors?

In the attempt to find answers to these questions, the author will first develop an original theoretical framework that, building on the relevant literature on security studies and area studies, and with an holistic approach, would serve as a fundamental instrument to interpret and systematize the contemporary security thinking in the Gulf region today. The subsequent chapter will introduce the case studies selected for this study. These will be the two intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017, unprecedented instances of intra-GCC divergences escalating into full-blown existential spats for the body. Generally speaking, when studying the notions of threats and security, the GCC is arguably one of the most relevant object of analysis. Indeed such notions are so central to this region that, the general consensus goes, the GCC itself was formed as a body for collective self-defence against common threats.[20] As a result, academics specialising in area studies often look at the security of the bloc of six Gulf monarchies as inextricably

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[20] Matteo Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economy Coordination in a Changing Middle East*. Vol. 44. (London: IB Tauris, 2011), Abdul Khaleq Abdulla. "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature Origin, and Process." In Michael Hudson (ed), *Middle East dilemma: The politics and economics of Arab integration* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing), 1999.

interdependent, almost a unitary good named 'Gulf security'.[21] Over the years, scholars have acknowledged some of the limits that prevent the GCC from becoming an effective organism for collective security.[22] However, in spite of the recurrent skirmishes, the existence of a common perception and prioritization of threats among the six monarchies has rarely been questioned. The two intra-GCC crises have shattered this narrative and exposed, via leaked official documents known as "Riyadh Agreements", a unique window into an official recognition of the issues identified as threats by the signatory governments. For this reason, the issues at the centre of these Agreements – namely, the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadi organizations and Iran-supported Shi'a groups – have been identified as suitable case studies to investigate divergent perceptions across the GCC. In the six chapters of this study's empirical part, the leaderships' perceptions of the three mentioned issues will be measured and systematized through the thesis' theoretical framework in each of the six GCC countries. While the research's methodology is largely examined in the next chapter, it seems appropriate to anticipate that security perceptions have been deducted by the researcher through a combination of the analysis of these countries' foreign and domestic policies in an historical perspective, a speech analysis of their political and media discourse, and an extensive fieldwork conducted in the region, including to gather interviews from relevant interlocutors. In all six empirical chapters, the first paragraph will be dedicated to measuring the impact of the so-called Arab Spring on the leadership's security perceptions, as a central argument of this thesis is that during and after the uprisings the fragmentation of the security calculus across the GCC regimes has crystallised. The three following paragraphs will analyse security perceptions vis-à-vis the three case study issues. The last paragraph will instead highlighting which issue has been perceived as a priority in each country in the period 2011-2017, and why. In the

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[21] Christian Koch, "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization." Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, *KAS International Reports* (2010): pp. 24-35; Thomas Naff, *Gulf security and the Iran-Iraq war*. National Defense University, (Washignton, 1985); Steven M. Wright, *The United States and Persian Gulf security: The foundations of the war on terror*. Vol. 12. (London: Garnet & Ithaca Press), 2007.
[22] Neil, Partrick, "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?" Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper No. 19: London: London School of Economics, 2011; John Peterson, "Sovereignty and Boundaries in the Gulf States: Settling the Peripheries" in Mehran Kamrava (ed.) *International Politics of the Persian Gulf.* (New York: Syracuse University Press), 2011, p. 21.

final chapter of the thesis, the researcher will summarize the findings of the thesis, attempting to highlight drivers of security perceptions across the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and highlighting the core elements shaping their process of prioritization, while evaluating the original theoretical notions and paradigms introduced.

This study therefore inscribes itself in the modern area studies literature looking at the realm of security: in particular, that dedicated to investigate the security calculus of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf since the formation of the GCC. In this sense, it might also be relevant to the literature on the international relations of the GCC countries: the connection with security studies is indeed strong and long-standing, as the GCC countries' international relations have long been interpreted as based upon needs of security and threat deterrence.[23] Hence, the literature relevant to this thesis is extensive and diverse and, therefore, it seems helpful to try and systematize it into categories, or waves, drawing similarities and patterns.

1.3 Literature review.

Studies pertaining to the described strand of scholarly literature produced since the early 1980s can be, loosely, categorized into three waves, not necessarily by chronological criteria but rather as per the different definition and prioritization of threats offered. In this categorization, first wave studies tend to prioritize exogenous and conventional hard security threats, second wave studies instead focus on endogenous, soft security threats and third wave studies often blur the distinction between exogenous and endogenous threats and give added weight to the ideological factors. A number of studies can be defined as transitional, and serve as a bridge between the different categories. From a theoretical perspective, while first wave studies tend to employ exclusively realist lenses, in several variations, other studies increasingly adopt mixed theoretical

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[23] Ken Matthews. *The Gulf Conflict and International Relations.* (London: Routledge), 1993; Paul Sullivan. "The Gulf War, Economic and Financial Linkages, and Arab Economic Development: Iraq – The Pivot?" in Tareq Y. Ismael, ed., *The International Relations of the Middle East in the 21st Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Kamrava, *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*.

approaches, from structural realism to constructivism, due to the tendency of the more contemporary literature to favour a comprehensive and holistic perspective.

First-wave studies focus on state entities as unitary actors and their effort to protect their strategic interests, mainly with a realist or neo-realist approach. The priority of these analyses is to detect actual and potential security challenges, usually defined as conventional military threats from external powers. First-wave studies are epitomized by Anthony Cordesman's comprehensive study on *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability*.[24] The study is heavily based on realist assumption on power metrics - size, population, resources, military capabilities - and geographic features, such as the proximity to a threatening big power. Cordesman has followed up his studies with a periodical assessment of the military resources of the GCC countries in comparison with that of Iran, stressing consistently how Iran was achieving defence self-sufficiency while the GCC countries remained dependent from the assistance of an outside power, the United States.[25] A similar perspective is embraced by Joseph Kostiner's analysis of the campaign to construct a GCC collective defence arrangement in the aftermath of the 1990–1991 war.[26] Kostiner focuses as well on conventional threats and realist considerations arguing how longstanding intra-GCC tensions over territorial boundaries pushed smaller states, such Kuwait and Bahrain, to prefer bilateral defence agreements with the United States and Britain instead of looking towards closer cooperation within the GCC. Subsequently, David Priess offers a modification of first-wave arguments, as explanations for the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council.[27] Building on Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances*, Priess argues that states react to increases in the level of threat that they face rather than to changes in the power of external actors: the policy driver shifts from balance-of-power to balance-of-threat.[28] He defines threats as

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[24] Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability*. (Boulder, CO:Westview,1984).
[25] Anthony H.Cordesman, and Khalid R. Al-Rodhan. *Gulf military forces in an era of asymmetric wars.* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group), 2007.
[26] Joseph Kostiner, "The Search for Gulf Security: The Politics of Collective Defense", *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, 16 (1992). A similar perspective is also in John Duke Anthony, "The Persian Gulf in Regional and International Politics: The Arab Side of the Gulf", in Hossein Amirsadeghi (ed.), *The Security of the Persian Gulf* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 174–175.
[27] David Priess, "Balance-of-Threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council", *Security Studies*, 5 (Summer 1996)
[28] Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987)

determined by aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions, thus broadening the traditional interpretation of threat including subversion, terrorism, espionage, and even political propaganda in the semantic camp of offensive power capabilities.[29] For this reason, Priess argues, in early 1981, the six smaller Arab monarchies of the Gulf put aside their rivalries with one another and set up the GCC in order to face a revisionist Iran which had begun to encourage or sponsor subversive movements throughout the region, and therefore posed a direct and proximate threat to their continued existence. By adopting such perspectives, however, it would be impossible to explain the centrality increasingly attributed by GCC states to actors not necessarily handled by states, such as Islamist and jihadist groups.[30]

Somehow in between the first and second waves, area studies have moved to explore the processes of internationalization and their impacts on the security calculus of the GCC countries. A large part of them have focused on the role of the external powers in the regional security balance, a role that has been central to the security calculus of the GCC countries since the times of British protectorates. The majority of scholars in these regards point to a benign role of the United Kingdom first and the United States later, as off-shore balancers of Gulf security. Despite the role of the United States in the region has historically began as an instrument for the American government to contrast its Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, and has retained a hegemonic character to this day, it was largely perceived as a congenial defence bulwark by the GCC regimes.[31] Most studies argue, for example, that the strong involvement of the United States in the regional security calculus beside the GCC countries has traditionally served as a powerful deterrent to the expansionist ambitions of the two big powers of the region.[32] At the same time, other scholars have pointed to the fact that this US-

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[29] Scott Cooper, "State-centric balance-of-threat theory", *Security Studies*, 13:2, (2003), pp. 306-349
[30] Vincent Durac. "The role of non-state actors in Arab countries after the Arab uprisings." *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2015*(2015): pp. 37-41.
[31] Geoffrey Kemp. "The Persian Gulf remains the strategic prize." *Survival* 40.4 (1998): pp. 132-149; Gregory Gause. *The international relations of the Persian Gulf.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009; Jeffrey Macris *The politics and security of the Gulf: Anglo-American hegemony and the shaping of a region.* (London: Routledge), 2010.
[32] There is a general consensus on this argument that didn't change much over time. See for example J.E. Peterson. *Defending Arabia.* (London: Croom Helm) 1986; Amin Saikal. "The United States and Persian Gulf Security." *World Policy Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1992, pp. 515–531 and Joseph Moynihan, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the

GCC security alliance triggers a significant "security dilemma", in particular in Saudi Arabia: while representing an effective deterrent, the presence of US military on Saudi soil, where the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina are located, has generated considerable domestic criticism of the regime.[33] Indeed, depending on the United States highlights the failure of local regimes to protect their citizens and is particularly problematic because criticism of US policy in the Middle East has traditionally been strong in the Arab public opinion. All these factors fuelled the anti-regime rhetoric of non-state jihadist groups such as al-Qa'ida.[34] However, the dependence of the GCC countries on military assistance from an outside power has also been analysed as a by-product of a specific policy choice of the regime to keep their own armed forces fragmented. The policy of fragmentation, dubbed by the literature "coup-proofing", has been explained by Steffen Hertog as the choice of regime elites to build up an 'army to watch the army' to reduce the risks of a military takeover - likely as a reaction to a number of coups planned in the 1960s and 1970s - as well as an instrument of patronage, whereby different security institutions are created to balance the ambitions of different factions within the ruling families.[35] The afore-mentioned elements factor in the GCC regimes calculus to rather cope with the security dilemma engendered by the presence of US bases on their soil. Most recently, Geoffrey Gresh has put forward a policy interpretation for such dilemma, arguing that host nations' leaders facing significant external threats - i.e., the threat of invasion from an outside aggressor or rivalry over contested territory - are more likely to accept US bases, while host nations' leaders pressed by extensive internal security threats - i.e., social upheaval, violent opposition movements, or mounting economic grievances against the ruling regime - are more likely to reject US bases.[36] His research incorporates the principle of the conflation "regime security" with "national security" as a feature of policy-making in the Gulf, overwhelmingly

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United States: Common and Uncommon Security Interests" in Christian Koch and David Long (eds.) *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century*, (London: IB Tauris), 1996.

[33] Fred H. Lawson "Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf" in Mehran Kamrava, ed. *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*; Clive A. Jones, 'Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War: The Internal–External Security Dilemma', *International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 6, (1995).

[34] Fawaz Gerges. *The far enemy: why Jihad went global.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009.

[35] Steffen Hertog. "Rentier militaries in the Gulf states: the price of coup-proofing." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43 (3), 2011: pp. 400-402.

[36] Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2015.

accepted by the contemporary area literature and in this study.[37] As for global actors, while still crucial in the security equation of the region, they will not be the focus of this thesis, whose primary interest is for regional perspectives on regional issues.

Second-wave studies enlarged the focus and the perspective, and started to look at the long term consequences of integrating the GCC into the globalized market and international community, where the loci of power are more diffused than ever.[38] These studies broaden the notions of threat to incorporate a wide range of economic, societal, environmental, demographic challenges that were largely neglected in first-wave accounts, as threatening societal and therefore political stability. Indeed, second-wave studies thoroughly debated the question of "security for whom". This literature expanded the answer to include individuals' and communities' security, however rather as a by-product of security policies, really aimed at preserving political stability and putting regime survival as the referent object of security. In this sense, second-wave studies introduced a wide variety of dynamics that could jeopardize the stability of regimes in the Arabian Peninsula, and widened the perspective dedicating growing attention to non-state actors and internal dynamics. These include domestic political challenges, such as the demands for greater popular participation voiced in most of the Arab Gulf states in the 1990s[39], the challenge of pushing liberalization without democratization[40]; the economic difficulties that accompanied the stagnation of world oil prices after the Gulf war[41]; the structural imbalances in the political economy of resources distribution and in the labour market[42]; demographic

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[37] Ehteshami Anoushiravan and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism." In Louise Fawcett, (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2013.

[38] Lawrence Potter, and Gary G. Sick. *Security in the Persian Gulf: origins, obstacles, and the search for consensus.* (New York: Macmillan), 2002; Jamal Al-Suweidi (ed.). *Arabian Gulf Security: Internal and External Challenges* (Abu Dhabi: ECSSR, 2008); Anoushiravan Ehteshami. *Dynamics of change in the Persian Gulf: political economy, war and revolution.* (London: Routledge), 2013.

[39] Neil Partrick and Francis Toase (eds), "Gulf Security: Opportunities and Challenges for the New Generation", RUSI Whitehall Papers no. 51 (London: RUSI, 2000);

[40] Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven M. Wright, (eds.) *Reform in the Middle East oil monarchies.* (New York: Ithaca), 2008.

[41] Gregory Gause, "The Political Economy of National Security in the GCC States", in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter (eds), *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium* (New York: St Martin's, 1997).

[42] Martin Baldwin-Edwards "Labour immigration and labour markets in the GCC countries: national patterns and trends." Research Paper n°15 (2011), *The Kuwait*

trends[43], in particular where indigenous nationals are a staggering minority of the total population; the long-term impacts of climate change;[44] the growing shortage of fresh water throughout the region.[45] Several scholars, interpreting the Arab Spring as uprisings that overthrew regimes through protests related primarily to socio-economic grievances, highlight the events of 2011 as a demonstration of the fundamental argument presented by this wave of literature.[46] *Insecure Gulf,* by Kristian Ulrichsen, embodies well this literature.[47] Adopting a constructivist approach, Ulrichsen argues that Gulf security is evolving as internal political and socioeconomic changes in the Gulf states interact with the processes of globalization, and that stability in the GCC countries is threatened not only by the conventional "hard security" threats but also by so-called "soft security" challenges to human security. These, in fact, risk eroding the internal consensus and thus the ruling bargain that binds ruler and ruled in the region. In the context of the future depletion of energy resources, Ulrichsen reflects upon the fact that ruling elites won't be able to rely on oil rents as insulation from internal problems and demands caused by social inequalities. For this reason, "soft security" challenges represent as much of a stability threat as "hard security" challenges. However, this perspective also leaves some questions unanswered. For instance, the reason why in the midst of a spectacular collapse of energy prices in 2014 – 2016, Saudi Arabia refused to cut its oil production, driving the prices further down.[48] Finally, Kristian Ulrichsen effectively describes that internal and external security have become inextricably linked as domestic structural

Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London Schools of Economics and Political Science.

[43] Ingo Forstenlechner and Emile Jane Rutledge, "The GCC's "Demographic Imbalance": Perceptions, Realities and Policy Options" *Middle East Policy Journal*, Volume XVIII, Number 4, (2011).

[44] James A. Russell, "Environmental Security and Regional Stability in the Persian Gulf", *Middle East Policy Council*, Volume XVI, 2009, Number 4.

[45] Geoffrey Kemp and Janice Gross Stein, "Enduring Sources of Conflict in the Persian Gulf Region", in Geoffrey Kemp, and Janice Gross Stein, (eds.) *Powder Keg in the Middle East: The Struggle for Gulf Security*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1995.; Michael E. Bonine, "Population Growth, the Labor Market and Gulf Security", in Long and Koch, *Gulf Security in the Twenty-first Century.*

[46] Bahgat Korany, "The Middle East since the Cold War" in Fawcett (ed) *International Relations of the Middle East* , p.90.

[47] Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: the End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era.* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2011.

[48] Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 175

imbalances weaken the state's capability to react cohesively to external threats, a perspective that is also adopted in this study.

Third-wave studies largely undertake a cognitive, discursive approach. Looking at how and by whom threats are constructed, these studies postulate that competing ideologies of statual organization can come to constitute security threats. Such trans-border threats, flourish in the Arab world because sovereignty remains a contested concept and because, as Gregory Gause effectively described in his *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, the region includes a multitude of trans-border identities – ethnic, sectarian, tribal, ideological – that connect people from different countries and can be easily exploited to spread any given ideology.[49] In this sense the capacity of an external power to influence politics in other countries can be based not only upon material resources but also, as per constructivist theories, upon ideological power. One notable example is the work of Michael Barnett, who centred his arguments on ideologies and identity politics.[50] Barnett wrote that frequently the threat posed to Arab states was the successful portrayal of a rival model of statual institutions and organising ideologies that potentially undermined the state's basis of existence. Ideologies like pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, especially when implying political unification as a way to safeguard the common Arab or Muslim interests, undermined the GCC states' sovereignty. For instance, Saudi Arabia was notoriously suspicious of Egyptian president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, who, brandishing pan-Arab rhetoric, had inspired the formation between the 1950s and the 1960s of a constellation of nationalist movements responsible for sustained instability in the Arabian Peninsula.[51] Ideological threats based on identity politics were discussed much in the post-Arab Spring context, as popular uprisings have developed across ideological and identitarian fault lines: Shi'a vs. Sunni, secularism vs. Islamism. Matteo Legrenzi has in this context argued that, bearing in mind the disequilibrium of societies in Middle Eastern states, the Arab Spring has brought to the surface an identity split between states and their regime and an absolute divergence of interests between regime and society with the latter

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[49] Gause. *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*.
[50] Michael Barnett, "Institutions, Roles and Disorder: The Case of the Arab States System," *International Studies Quarterly*, 37, no. 3 (1993): 271–296.
[51] Fred Halliday. *Arabia without Sultans*. (Saqi, 2013).

becoming a threat to the former.[52] He further argues that while after 2011 the traditional identity dichotomy between pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism has dissolved, the politicization of sectarian ties has created a new dichotomy and a new security dilemma in the Arabian Peninsula. If Sunni GCC regimes balance against their Shi'a population, perceived as the "fifth column" of Iran, this in turn increase the societal fragmentation that feeds ideological and identitarian threats. This is the perspective adopted by several scholars dealing with the post-Arab Spring GCC, who additionally point at the cynical manipulation of identity politics by regimes as a tool to advance their domestic and foreign policy interests. [53] Going beyond the idea of sectarianism as an unending, primordial conflict between Sunni and Shi'a, scholars point to the multiple crosscutting divisions, alliances and overlapping identities within the Sunni and Shi'a camps – Iran's alliance with Hamas being the primary example – and to the role of agency and exclusivist polity. [54] Gregory Gause explains sectarianism as a tool of power politics that Gulf regimes employ to balance against both domestic and foreign threats: a part of a game for regional influence that he calls the Middle East New Cold War, rather than a centuries-long inevitable religious dispute.[55] Anti-Shi'a mobilization is thus viewed as an effective way of rallying the support of domestic populations around, respectively, an anti-Iranian or anti-Saudi foreign policy and anti-dissidents at the national level. Arguably, this useful perspective could be further strengthened by analyzing the reasons why, within the GCC, some leaders perceived their countries as significantly more vulnerable than others to the type of ideological threats described by third-wave studies.

1.4 Contribution to the field.

[52] Matteo Legrenzi (ed.). *Security in the Gulf: Historical Legacies and Future Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2013).
[53] "The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism" POMEPS Brief #28, 5 January 2016, http://pomeps.org/2016/01/05/brief-28-the-gulfs-escalating-sectarianism/ (accessed 9 May 2019)
[54] Toby Matthiesen. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that wasn't*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2013; Frederic M. Wehrey *Sectarian politics in the Gulf: from the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings*. (New York: Columbia University Press), 2013.
[55] Gregory Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", Report, Brookings Institution, 22 July 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/ (accessed 9 May 2019)

Generally speaking, the presented theories have in common that, while they remain valid and applicable to the present, no single one of them seems exhaustive enough to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phase started in 2011 in the GCC security thinking. This thesis intends to build upon the afore-mentioned literature, measuring it against the most recent developments in the region while widening theoretical perspectives and, at the same time, enhancing dynamism in terms of definitions. The researcher's position within this broad range of arguments, further detailed in the chapter building the thesis' conceptual framework, is devoted to three efforts primarily.

The first effort undertaken is the definition of the concepts of threats and security as perceived by GCC policy-makers. After reviewing existing theories, the author chooses to build on Barry Buzan's ideas about the comprehensiveness of the concept of security and his approach mixing, loosely, neorealism and constructivism.[56] This thesis will also embrace the overlapping of the referent object and subject of security at the level of the GCC regimes' perceptions, i.e. the conflation of 'regime security' with 'national security'.[57] Different from Buzan's approach, however, this thesis embraces the idea of security as a matter of degree and theorises a differentiation between threats and risks. In fact a shortcoming of the existing literature seems to be the uncritical and too frequent use of the term 'threat' to indicate dangers of various intensity. This research will employ the term 'threat' specifically to define risks that become acute enough to take on overtly political dimensions, i.e. dangers perceived as having intent and capability to hinder state boundaries, state institutions, regime stability or sovereignty. This choice, far from being a normative one, is driven by - and explained through - region-specific realities stemming from the GCC countries' own historical background.[58] In fact an issue securitised into a threat by one regime may be perceived as a risk by others.

The second effort will be to unearth structural vulnerabilities that are pre-existing in the context of the referent object and explore their role vis-à-vis decision-

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[56] Barry Buzan, *People, states and fear*. (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 1991.
[57] The conflation between regime and national security has been broadly explored, including in: Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism."; Pinar Bilgin. *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 2004).
[58] Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman*. Vol. 10. (London: Routledge, 2016).

makers perceptions in operationalising the differentiation between threats and risks.[59] The study describes vulnerabilities, borrowing the definition from Fabien Nathan's environmental studies, as conditions thought to determine the incapacity of the state to contain, cope with, adapt to and recover from a damaging phenomenon and that thus raise the susceptibility of decision-makers to the impact of said phenomenon.[60] In particular, the focus will be on socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities, defining the former as an institutionalised low level of socio-political cohesiveness, determining a deficit of ruling legitimacy, and the latter as large inequalities, imbalances or failures in the national economy. In analysing those vulnerabilities, the researcher will rely on the literature on the security of developing states, including the work of scholars such as Azar and Moon,[61] and rentier states, including by Steffen Hertog.[62] However these vulnerabilities may inform rather than determine the perceptions of policy-makers that, as the literature on sociology and psychology has validated, are also impacted by collective memory, symbolic events or actors, and human cognitive factors, particularly relevant in the GCC context, where policy-making is highly centralised and personalised.[63]

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[59] Ole Waever, "Securitization and Desecuritization"in Ronnie Lipschutz (ed), *On Security*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) p. 6.

[60] Fabien Nathan, "Natural Disasters, Vulnerability and Human Security", in: Brauch, Hans Günter; Oswald Spring, Úrsula; Grin, John; Mesjasz, Czeslaw; Kameri-Mbote, Patricia; Behera, Navnita Chadha; Chourou, Béchir; Krumme-nacher, Heinz (eds.), *Facing Global Environmental Change: Environmental, Human, Energy, Food, Health and Water Security Concepts.* Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace, vol. 4 (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2009).

[61] David Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (1996): pp. 143–171; Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament,* (Lynne Rienner, 1995); Edward Azar, and Chung-in Moon. "Third world national security: Toward a new conceptual framework." *International Interactions* 11.2 (1984): pp. 103-135.

[62] Steffen Hertog. "The sociology of the Gulf rentier systems: Societies of intermediaries." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52.02 (2010): pp. 282-318; David Held and Kristian Ulrichsen, eds. *The transformation of the Gulf: politics, economics and the global order.*(London: Routledge, 2013).

[63] Robert Jervis. *Perception and misperception in international politics.* (Princeton University Press, 1976); Michael J. Williams "(In) Security studies, reflexive modernization and the risk society." *Cooperation and Conflict* 43.1 (2008): pp. 57-79; Ted Hopf, *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999.* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002); Robin Hogarth and William Goldstein. *Judgment and decision making: An interdisciplinary reader.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Margaret G Hermann and Joe D Hagan, "International Decision Making: Leadership Matters," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998).

The third effort would be to propose a system to categorise such perceived threats in their dimensions and types. I will argue that, while the relevant literature has provided us with clear descriptive categories, there has been little attention to the increasing multi-dimensionality of threats and their intersections, particularly those emerging after 2011. In the contemporary context indeed, rather than arguing that threats can be categorised only as external or internal, it seems more fitting to speak of three types of threats: external threats, or threats originated from external sources that affect the international interests of the country; internal threats, or threats that have endogenous roots and affect the internal stability of the country; 'intermestic' threats, or threats that have a mixed external and internal nature, such as those moved by exogenous motives but having domestic implications or vice versa. As far as prioritization of threats is concerned, this thesis investigates the hypothesis that 'intermestic' threats might be perceived as particularly powerful in the GCC region.[64]

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[64] This is similar to what theorised by Gregory Gause in "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf." *Security Studies* 13.2 (2003): pp. 273-305.

2.0 CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD.

The purpose of this section is to build up a theoretical framework instrumental for carrying on, in the next sections, an empirical, in-depth analysis of threats perceptions by the GCC regimes in the post-2011 context. In this chapter it will also be explained what method is going to be used in applying the framework to the subsequent analysis. In order to construct this framework, it is fundamental to first shed light on the main intellectual concepts that will be employed in the same.

In fact, the first subsection is devoted to providing a definition for the core concepts employed throughout the thesis, such as 'security', 'threat' and 'risk', in a way that satisfactorily applies to the area and timeline studied. In particular, the definitions will be heavily localized from the perspective of the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, taking stock of the many historical and systemic specificities that impact these concepts' rationalization in the region.

In the following section, the research addresses and explains the choice to focus on security perceptions treated here as pivotal in the operationalization of the defined threats and the main factors informing the behaviour of policy-makers. The thesis will then address the role of objective socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities as identified by the researcher in the formation of said perceptions.

Subsequently, the researcher presents a framework that will be employed to categorise such threats in their dimensions and types. It will be argued that, while the relevant literature has provided sufficient descriptive categories to define the diverse types of threats that are most common to the GCC regimes, and their diachronic evolution, there has been little attention to the increasing multi-dimensionality of threats, their intersections, and how to coherently but comprehensively schematise them.

Afterwards, the thesis will put forward an hypothesis for threats prioritization, looking at what instruments can be used to verify it. The final section of this chapter will then be dedicated to describing the method and structure of the entire study.

Two preliminary considerations, that have emerged trough a recollection of the main developments in the conceptual scholarship on security studies, seem helpful in the process of building up the necessary theoretical background, First, that the field has been liberated by epistemological assumptions thus allowing researchers to broaden their theoretical perspective and indulge in a form of eclecticism while elaborating original theories. Secondly, that there is a growing appreciation of the cultural and historical specificities and the observation of the temporally contingent empirical reality, that serves well the intention of this thesis.

2.1 Defining the terms: security, threats, risks.

2.1.1 The debate on security

All definitions of the concept of 'threat' are, of course, inextricably linked to that of security. The conceptual analysis of security has gone from an uncontested unidimensional definition in the pre-Cold War period, when the field was known as 'strategic studies', to a more recent dynamic phase of a diverse academic debate on the very fundamental characteristics of the concept.[65] In 1991, Barry Buzan, a theoretical point of reference in this thesis, described security as 'an underdeveloped concept', ambiguous, 'essentially contested', elastic in its meaning.[66] Richard Ullman and others went as far as to declare that 'we may not realize what it [security] is ... until we are threatened with losing it'.[67] In refuting Ullman's idea, this thesis argues that, although the meaning of security has been subject to a very broad and perhaps confusing debate, security has to be defined - at least implicitly - on a daily basis, for pragmatic reasons such as, for example, in the context of policy-making. Indeed by taking the perspective of relating conceptual analysis to operationalization, this thesis aims at offering a - flexible - interpretation of the concept of security. The purpose of this discussion is, however, not to settle the rather comprehensive dispute on defining security, but only to offer an interpretation that is relevant to the context studied. In fact, this

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[65] P. G. Bock and Morton Berkowitz, "The Emerging Field of National Security", *World Politics*, 19 (1966), p. 124; Klaus Knorr "National Security Studies: Scope and Structure of the Field", in Frank N. Trager and Philip S. Kronenberg (eds.), *National Security and American Society: Theory, Process and Policy* (Lawrence, KS), 1973, p. 5.
[66] Buzan, *People, states and fear*.
[67] Richard H. Ullman, "Redefining Security", *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Summer, 1983), pp. 130, 133.

study embraces the idea that while objective, abstract factors are instrumental in a security calculus, they are not sufficient: subjective factors inevitably weigh in As Alexander Wendt argued, 'security is what actors make of it'.[68]

The traditional succinct definition of security as 'freedom from threats' has opened up questions such as: security for what, from which threats, by whom, and by what means. Across the different answers to these questions, the debate among the different schools of thoughts unfolded. From a realist perspective, objective security is achieved when the dangers posed by threats are out powered by individuals, societal groups, the state or regional or global international organization.[69] For realists, the only way for states to be free from threats is to show power: security becomes a derivative, sometimes almost a synonym, of power. This interpretation, that was relevant during the period of the World Wars, where states were in a constant struggle for power, was fiercely criticised later on. Still, before and during the Cold War, security studies was composed mostly of scholars interested in military statecraft. If military force was relevant to an issue, it was considered a security issue; otherwise, that issue was consigned to the category of politics. However, there have been several attempts to redefine this idea after the end of the Cold War and, since the 1990s, new debates have emerged with contributions from - inter alia - constructivism, critical security studies, post-structuralism, feminism, the Copenhagen School. For instance, from a social constructivist approach, security is achieved once the perception and fears of security threats are allayed and overcome.[70] Security is, as such, conceived as an outcome of a process of social and political interaction where social values and norms, collective identities and cultural traditions are essential to form perceptions. This idea, although relevant, developed into substantial contradictions with regards to defining the referent object of security. While some scholars continued to speak primarily of national security, taking the state as the major referent, many others started to speak more often of human

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[68] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International Organization*, 46.02 (1992): pp. 391-425.
[69] An excellent overview of the different schools of thought in the field of security studies can be found in: Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq, (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*. (London: Routledge), 2016.
[70] Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the middle ground: constructivism in world politics." *European journal of international relations* 3.3 (1997): pp. 319-363.

security, with individuals or humankind as the referent.[71] Further on, the idea of security has been subjected to a reconceptualization by the process of globalization, becoming even more multifaceted and complex. To the extent that, in the Western contemporary debate, as the perspective of conventional military threats faded away in Europe and the United States, often security has been related to the prevention and protection against uncertainties, more similar to societal crises rather than manifest or latent dangers.[72] This perspective won't be embraced by this thesis: indeed it seems too deeply framed into the context of human- and socio-centric security which doesn't seem applicable in the region most hit by wars in contemporary times. Instead, this thesis will build extensively on Barry Buzan's ideas about the comprehensiveness of the concept of security. An excellent interpreter of the eclectic post-Cold War debate, from the Copenhagen School, his analysis can be considered to be a loose mix of neorealism and constructivism, favouring the latter.

2.1.2 This thesis' approach to the lexicon of security.

In his book, *People, States and Fear*, Barry Buzan points out that the concept of security was 'too narrowly founded' and his goal was to, therefore, offer a 'broader framework of security'.[73] Buzan explicitly suggests that to attempt formulating a precise definition of security would be to disregards the set of 'contradictions latent within the concept itself', in particular as the state's pursuit of security for itself may conflict with the pursuit of individuals or international security.[74] Nonetheless the soundness of the claim, in terms of operationalization, this remains one of the trickiest spots of Buzan's theory. Indeed, in the context of the crafting of a security agenda, contradictions are daily occurrences that, rather than preventing the definition of security, call for an even more detailed definition - in terms of degrees - and a constant effort of establishing prioritization.

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[71] Roland Paris, "Human security: Paradigm shift or hot air?" *International Security* 26.2 (2001): pp. 87-102.
[72] Alan Collins. *Contemporary Security Studies.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2016.
[73] Buzan, *People, states and fear,* p. 4.
[74] As described earlier, Buzan views security as a relational phenomenon and states as embedded in regional and international systems. Buzan, *People, states and fear,* pp. 1-2.

Similarly to Buzan, this thesis also embraces a state- and regime-centric definition of security and threats. Far from being a normative choice, this perspective has a purely pragmatic driver: for the purpose of this research, interested in looking at the formation of security agendas in the GCC countries, policy-makers and decision-makers, and their perceptions, retain a central place. The decision-making process in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf is largely limited to the ruler and his closest family, who are also members of the ruling elites. A direct consequence of this over-centralization of the decision-making process in the GCC, as well as the unique role played by the ruling families in the GCC countries' foundational myths, has been the complete conflation of 'regime security' with 'national security', a point that has been examined extensively and validated often in the area literature. [75] Even those scholars who call for the necessity to prioritise human security in the region, often do so by arguing that a lack of attention towards public grievances is most likely to generate regime instability, thus implicitly reinforcing the regime-centric perspective.[76] Keeping in mind these context-specific characteristics, security - as perceived by the GCC regimes- is taken to be about the ability of regimes to maintain their independent identity, their functional integrity and sovereignty against forces of change, which they see as hostile. This is a definition that assumes the basic primacy of political variables in determining the degree of security that states and regimes enjoy.

The matter of degree is indeed a second critical issue in Buzan's literature. Regardless of what provisions, responses or policies are taken, there is always only partial chances of success, and thus a partial assurance of security. Buzan recognizes this, but treats it as a logical problem and argues that if security is conceived as a matter of degree then 'complicated and objectively unanswerable questions arise about how much security is enough.' [77] This researcher objects to that and to such questions being objectively unanswerable. Rather, this study embraces the idea of varying degrees of security as a function of perceptions and operationalizes it by introducing a distinction between threats and risks. Both

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[75] Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism."

[76] Andreas Krieg, "Gulf Security Policy After the Arab Spring" in Khalid S. Almezaini, and Jean-Marc Rickli, eds. *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*. (London: Routledge), 2016.

[77] Barry Buzan," New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century" *International Affairs*, 67.3 (1991), pp. 432-433

terms have similar attributes, in particular: a negative connotation as damaging phenomena, the capacity to defy control, ambiguity. At the same time, they also have a fundamental difference: risk has much less certainty of expectation and, most importantly, the scope of the potential negative impact is unsure. This research will employ the term 'threat' specifically to define risks that become acute enough to take on overtly political dimensions and hinder the identity and sovereignty of the regime or the functional integrity of regime's institutions. This approach is grounded in the literature on security in the developing states, especially that authored by scholars from developing states themselves. For instance, scholars concerned with the Middle Eastern region, such as David Priess and Mohammed Ayoob, strongly criticised the legitimacy of the state as a homogeneous unit of analysis, distancing themselves from the idea of the nation-state as a unitary actor and focusing instead on state-society relations often in opposition with one another.[78] Accordingly, they found that GCC rulers, similarly to other rulers who have not come into office through a democratic process, perceive threats chiefly through the lenses of regime survival. Given how this study puts decision-makers' perceptions as a key object of research, it will work by defining full-fledged threats only those risks which develop a clear-cut political dimension. This is not to say, however, that only political threats exist: as will be detailed later, there can be many dimensions to threats, but they all share a political one. In other words, for instance, in the context of the GCC, environmental or economic dangers do not become part of the security calculus unless they threaten to have political outcomes that affect the survivability of states or of governing elites within those states.

In these definitions, decision-makers are those who operationalize the distinction between threats and risks, by assigning or not assigning the political variable to a given issue, through the so-called securitization. The core idea of the securitization, formulated by Ole Waever, is that security can be analysed as a speech act, which brings certain referent objects and threats into existence by being uttered as such by securitizing actors.[79] While for Waever the constitution of referent objects and threats are closely linked to the practice of securitization,

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[78] Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council."; Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament*; Brian Job, (ed.) *The Insecurity dilemma: national security of Third World states.* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1992.)

[79] Waever, "Securitization and Desecuritization", p. 6.

and they do not exist independently of their discursive articulation, this thesis will employ the securitization theory specifically as one of the tools to differentiate between risks and threats, by highlighting relevant speeches by securitizing actors. The choice to securitize a risk into a threat may be driven by genuine security perceptions as well as by ulterior motives, such as promoting a specific narrative for a political agenda. Distinguishing the narrative from genuine perceptions will be one of the major objectives of this study and this researcher. In order to do so effectively, it will be necessary to entertain a detailed unpacking of the key elements shaping security perceptions as analysed by the relevant academic literature, which is the scope of the following section.

2.2 Decoding perceptions

The role of perceptions in states' behaviour is only partially addressed in the literature on international relations and security studies as well as the area studies literature. Gregory Gause, one of the few scholars that focused on the topic, wrote that: 'Each state's behaviour is rooted in perception of both the international situation and its own status as a state.'[80] This implies that the actual threat matters less than the perceived threat in terms of policy-making as studying the perceptions held by key actors 'casts a light on how officials decide which issues become securitised and subsequently acted upon' and thus 'vital to understanding the changing dynamics of Persian Gulf security'.[81] At the same time Gause also noted that very little literature exists on the topic as 'there seems to be an assumption that the source of greatest threat is obvious to observers or subjects.'[82] What little literature exists arguably emphasizes the opposite point: that the conceptualization of threats is not obvious at all and it is a contingent and frequently controversial process. This study defines perceptions as the process of apprehending and interpreting an issue in its damaging potential and treats it as a dynamic process subject to change over time. How perceptions are formed, in particular in contemporary times at the level of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, will be the focus of this section.

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[80] Gause "Balancing What?", p. 276.
[81] Kristian Ulrichsen, "Introduction" in Kristian Ulrichsen (ed), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, (London: Hurst), 2017, p. 15.
[82] Ibid., p. 278

An important caveat in this regard is that the area literature has recently pointed out to the exploitation of security concerns on behalf of GCC rulers. Since the oil prices plummeted in 2014, GCC rulers have faced a time of scarce resource revenues, the same revenues that are instrumental, in all rentier economies, to distribute economic benefits that the population expects to receive from the state. Some scholars have advanced the argument that, given the necessity to reform away from overreliance on subsidies, regimes have chosen to transform security in a tool for accruing political support by hyper-securitizing non-threatening issues.[83] By highlighting threats, and emphasizing their ability to guarantee security, GCC regimes would thus reinforce domestic backing and guarantee political quiescence. Authors focusing on sectarianism have argued that by amplifying the dangers posed by Iran's interference in their countries, GCC rulers have been able to label their indigenous Shi'a communities as Iran's 'fifth column' and therefore ignore and delegitimize their dissent.[84] Although this researcher acknowledges that heightening security concerns in a population, or rallying against a common enemy, are long-standing effective political techniques to guarantee quiescence, and are largely in use, this research rejects the argument that all threats have been completely 'manufactured' in the regimes' narratives for their political agenda.[85] Rather the contemporary hyper-securitization is a by-product of the conjuncture of a unique number of different dangers arising contemporarily, and it severely complicates the task to distinguish narratives from genuine perceptions.

Central to the study of threat perceptions is the rationalist approach arguing that leaders perceive threat as such because they do not have complete information.[86] The decision-makers lack a full picture on a potentially damaging issue and thus feel compelled to identify it as a threat and react irrationally. The emphasis of these rationalist accounts is thus largely on the ability of the 'sender' of the threatening signals, the source of the perceived threat, in formulating credible messages. Yet, actors also have strong incentives to bluff or deceive, to

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[83] Helle Malmvig. "Power, identity and securitization in Middle East: Regional order after the Arab uprisings." *Mediterranean Politics* 19.1 (2014): pp. 145-148.
[84] For example see Matthiesen. *Sectarian Gulf.*
[85] Justin Gengler, "The Political Economy of Sectarianism in the Gulf." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2016, p. 9.
[86] James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war." *International organization* 49.03 (1995): pp. 379-414; Robert Powell. "War as a commitment problem." *International organization* 60.01 (2006): pp. 169-203.

conceal their weaknesses or to exaggerate their capabilities, especially when they are entangled in the classic 'security dilemma', i.e. they themselves fear attack from the target.[87] The problem in the rationalist approach is that, with its focus on the source of threats and information on intention, it largely neglects the role of interpretation of the signals by the targets themselves, which is, instead, what constructivists focus on.[88] For example, in 1976 Robert Jervis looked at why states reacted differently to the same objective external situation and concluded that diverging interpretations were the driving factors behind divergent reactions.[89] Though influenced by structural, systemic realities, interpretation is not restrained by them and remains subjective and even irrational. This thesis will also give pre-eminence to the target's interpretation of a danger rather than to the intentions of the sender when referring to the decision-makers' perceptions.

Mentioning the pre-eminence of the interpretation of a threat by the target also entails focusing on the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping the process of perceptions formation.[90] For example, their identity as Arab-Islamic monarchies and tribal societies entails a number of socio-cultural factors in the countries object of this study. Another factor impacting the shaping of perception is that of collective memory. Alexander Wendt discussed it in the debate surrounding the causes of the Bosnian Civil War, highlighting the role the collective Serb historical perception played in the conflict.[91] This collective memory has emerged in the empirical part of this study in several instances, including when a more benign perception of Iran's regional role in Oman is put into correlation with the military assistance given by Iran's Shah to the Omani Sultan during the Dhofar War in the 1960s and 1970s, an assistance that was instrumental for the Sultan to quell the insurgency and consolidate his reign.[92]

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[87] Fred H. Lawson "Neglected Aspects of the Security Dilemma." in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (eds.), *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK), 1993, pp. 100-126.

[88] Jervis. *Perception and misperception in international politics*.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Michael J. Williams "(In) Security studies, reflexive modernization and the risk society." *Cooperation and Conflict* 43.1 (2008): 57-79.

[91] Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999, p. 163.

[92] Jeremy Jones, and Nicholas Ridout. *A history of modern Oman.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2015; Gertjan Hoetjes, "Iran-GCC relations: the case of Oman" in Maaike Warnaar, Luciano Zaccara and Paul Aarts (eds.), *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests over Historic Rivalry*, (Berlin: Gerlach Press), 2016.

However, beyond systemic or historical elements, contingent factors - such as events and actors - also shape threat perceptions.[93] While an event cannot be the exclusive source of threat, it is often the mechanism that brings the underlying threat to the attention of the target.[94] Alongside events, also actors, both in reference to the senders and to the receivers of the threatening signals, are a fundamental element in the context of the shaping of perceptions.[95] Senders - i.e. the sources of the potential threat - are central to the formation of the threat image because they can represent the embodiment and personification of threats, also because often they can be neutralised much more easily than it would be to neutralize the actual danger. As mentioned earlier, receivers - i.e. the threatened - are even more central, down to the analysis of their individual cognition and even emotions.[96] Scholars have long explained deviations from purely rational behaviours through the tendency of humans towards simplification and making assessments consistent with their beliefs as the main instruments to make sense of environments that are both uncertain and complex.[97] In political science, these 'human factors', including personality, political cognition and socialization into cultural environments, become all the more important as the role of individuals becomes more pivotal in polities.[98] The importance of keeping track of these features is keenly reflected in the nature of Gulf Arab politics where the role of leaders is widely understood to be central.[99] In the GCC context, where all states are highly autocratic and leaders are the final representatives of the national interest, foreign and security policies are the domains in which the leaders face the least constrains to act according to their own perceptions. Gregory Gause went even as far as writing: 'In the Gulf, the personal is the

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[93] Johan Eriksson and Erik Noreen. "Setting the agenda of threats: An explanatory model." Uppsala: Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 2002.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Johan Eriksson and Erik Noreen. "Setting the agenda of threats."
[96] Robin Hogarth and William Goldstein. *Judgment and decision making: An interdisciplinary reader.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[97] Philip Tetlock. *Expert political judgment: How good is it? How can we know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.); Reid Hastie and Robyn M. Dawes. *Rational Decision in an uncertainty world: The psychology of judgment and decision making.* (London: Sage, 2001).
[98] Hermann and Hagan, "International Decision Making".
[99] A comprehensive description of the process of policy-making in the Arab Gulf monarchies and the centrality of the leaders appears in Gause. "Understanding the Gulf States."

political, particularly in foreign policy.'[100] Policy-making isn't subject to hard bureaucratic scrutiny, nor to the critical review of the press, that addresses a scarcely engaged public opinion. Citizens do elect representatives in parliament or local assemblies but the constrains that those elected institutions can oppose to foreign policy or security decisions is non-existent.[101] Therefore it is hard to dispute the notion that monarchs of the Gulf enjoy a formidable impact on policy-making. The fact is exemplified by, for example, the dramatic changes in Qatar's foreign policy produced by Sheikh Hamad al-Khalifa. Ascending to the throne in 1995, Sheikh Hamad transformed Qatar from the low profile, loyal ally of Saudi Arabia the country had been since the 1970s, into a small global player using its vast wealth to create a world-class brand and having an autonomous role in high-level negotiations.[102] It is primarily because of how much impact the rulers can have that their perceptions are treated as pivotal in this thesis: leaders can securitise any given issue, operationalise the distinction between risks and threats and determine their prioritization. A particularly interesting case, relevant to the former point, is that of perceptions towards the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar versus the United Arab Emirates after 2011, when the Arab Spring erupted and Brotherhood-affiliated groups began to emerge, challenge, and obtain power. The ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad, a long-standing practitioner of the art of international politics, saw it as an opportunity to strengthen Qatar's regional reach via Brotherhood-affiliated local groups, while the de-facto leader of Abu Dhabi[103], Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Commander of the Armed Forces, a man of military culture, perceived it as a threat becoming more powerful and 'launched a full-fledged attack…against the Muslim Brotherhood…locally and regionally'.[104] Several scholars have analysed

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[100] Ibid., p. 3

[101] Lewis W Snider. "Comparing the Strength of Nations: The Arab Gulf States and Political Change." *Comparative Politics* 20.4 (1988): pp. 461-484.

[102] Lina Khatib, "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism," *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): p.418.

[103] Secret US diplomatic cables from 2009 refer to him as 'the man who runs the United Arab Emirates…[and is]…the key decision maker on national security issues." "Scenesetter for the President's Meeting with Shaykh Mohammed Bin Zayed," *Wikileaks* (31 August 2009), https://cablegatesearch.wikileaks.org/cable.php?id=09ABUDHABI862., (accessed 7 May 2019).

[104] Mazhar al-Zo'by and Birol Başkan, "Discourse and Oppositionality in the Arab Spring: The Case of the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE," *International Sociology* (2014): p.2.

the roots of such different perceptions in countries very similar from a political, geopolitical, social, economic perspective and, frequently, a determining role has been attributed to the personal cognition of the leaders.[105]

However, in spite of the vast power that GCC rulers enjoy, there is one constrain that should be taken into account: maintaining a basis of domestic consensus. In that, the level of discretionality GCC leaders choose to embrace in crafting their national security agenda is one that generally takes into account their country's structural features, especially when they represent what this study defines as 'vulnerabilities', the topic of the next subsection.

2.3 Vulnerabilities

Borrowing the definition from Fabien Nathan's environmental studies, I describe vulnerabilities as conditions which determine the incapacity of the state to contain, cope with, adapt to and recover from a damaging phenomenon and that thus may raise the susceptibility of decision-makers to the impact of said phenomenon.[106] Nathan characterized vulnerabilities as context-dependent, dividing them into physical exposure and insufficient capacities. Undoubtedly, the GCC countries can be considered as physically exposed, given their location in one of the most unstable and volatile region in the world and given the fact that five out of six are small states. As for 'insufficient capacities' Nathan categorizes them into: physical, legal, organizational, technical, cultural, socio-political and socio-economic.[107] Something that could be defined as a vulnerability of physical capacities, especially poignant in some of the GCC states, is related to their armed forces. Amid a number of coups, including some successful ones, taking place in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s some GCC regimes have chosen to keep their own armed forces fragmented and underskilled to reduce the risks of a military takeover. The policy, dubbed 'coup-proofing', has been explained in the literature by arguing that, in some cases, armies have been kept deliberately below their

[105] David Roberts "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?." *Middle East Policy* 21.3 (2014): 84-94; David Roberts "Mosque and State: The United Arab Emirates Secular Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs* (2016); Christopher Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam." in Andreas Krieg, (ed), *Divided Gulf.* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan), 2019, pp. 71-90.
[106] Nathan, "Natural Disasters, Vulnerability and Human Security".
[107] Ibid.

potential level, several praetorian guards have been created and military budgets have been allocated to acquire high-tech kit rather than training and building operational capacity.[108] This is a clear-cut example of a key vulnerability in the face of potential threats for the GCC countries. While acknowledging this and other vulnerabilities, this research will especially focus on socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities, respectively defined as institutionalised lack of integration, determining a legitimacy deficit, and systematic discriminations and imbalances in the national economies.

An important reflection to add is that while these vulnerabilities are objective, systemic factors, subjective factors generally maintain pre-eminence. Hence, while often times structural vulnerabilities inform decision-makers' perceptions and policies, that is not necessarily always the case. At times GCC leaders ignore or exploit said vulnerabilities to perpetuate a *status quo* that preserves their hegemonic position as individual leaders in the short-term, despite weakening regime's stability in the long-term.

2.3.1 Socio-political vulnerabilities.

Writing on what they term as 'Third World', Azar and Moon emphasized the 'software' side of the security problematique as opposed to the 'hardware' side of the problem on which traditional Western analyses of security tend to concentrate.[109] They operationalized the concept of 'security software' by disaggregating it into three primary components: legitimacy, integration, and policy capacity. These scholars argue that not enough time has been available to state-makers in MENA countries to develop the intangible ingredients of security, including the identification of the people with the state (legitimacy) and of people with each other (integration). What Azar and Moon term as integration is referred to by Barry Buzan as 'the variable of sociopolitical cohesiveness': Buzan also accords primary explanatory power to this variable - that he considers defining feature in the distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' states - and he also relates this difference to the time available to states to complete the processes of state making and nation building.[110] Interestingly, in addition to a country's historical

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[108] Hertog "Rentier militaries in the Gulf states".

[109] Edward Azar, and Chung-in Moon. "Third world national security: Toward a new conceptual framework." *International Interactions* 11.2 (1984): 103-135.

[110] Buzan, *People, states and fear,* p. 82

depth, Buzan also speaks of the importance of states' founding ideologies. Describing the essence of the state, he refers to a triangle whose three points are: the physical base of the state (effective sovereignty, international consensus on territorial limits); the institutional expression of the state (consensus on political rules of the game but also on the scope of state institutions); and the idea of the state (implicit social contract and ideological consensus pertaining to a given society).[111] All three elements are key to determine the strength or weakness of a statual entity: a state whose founding ideology isn't shared, or is contested, is automatically weaker and more vulnerable, especially to threats to its own identity. This perspective, dubbed the 'legitimacy approach', introduces the socio-political variable in alternative to a more traditional perspective, the 'institutional approach', which only considered the administrative capability of the state and the ability of the state apparatus to affirm its authority over the society.[112]
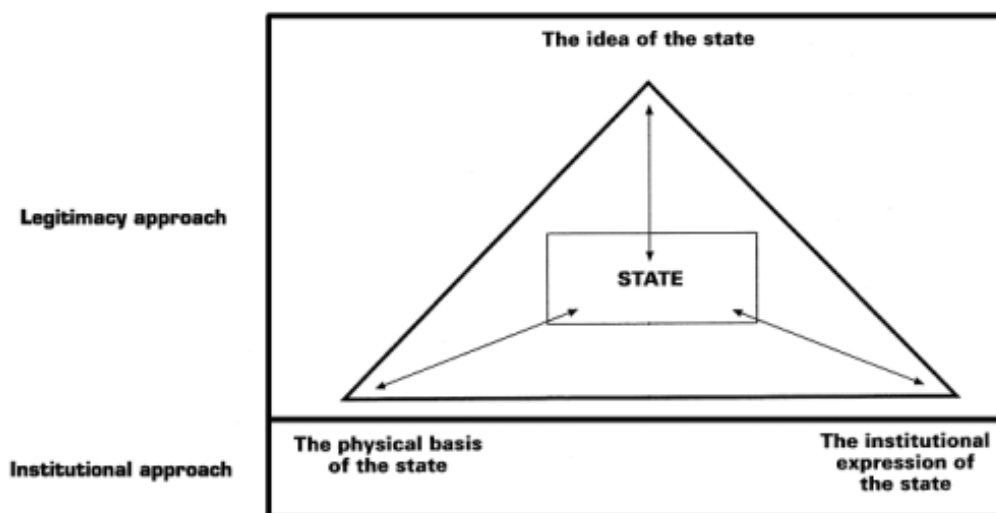
Figure 2.3.1: Difference between the institutional approach and the legitimacy approach.

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, objects of this research, often no more than a few decades past independence, and usually having socially exclusive rather than shared founding ideologies, fit in the description of Buzan's 'weak' states and are very susceptible regarding their national identity. Therefore, the concept of 'ontological security' - the need of states to have a distinctive and consistent sense of self and to have that sense affirmed by others - appears

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[111] Ibid.
[112] This rather effective distinction and the accompanying illustration (Figure 2.3.1) appear in Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, "'Statebuilding without nation-building? Legitimacy, state failure and the limits of the institutionalist approach'. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3 (2010): p. 25.

particularly relevant to Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, as May Darwich points out. [113] As opposed to other Arab states, where nationalism was based on ethnic elements combined with territorial affinities related to the struggle against colonialism, the GCC states were not born out of a struggle for national self-determination, but under the protection of an external power, and don't have a nationalist tradition to appeal to as intended elsewhere. Instead, gcc monarchs have tended to use tribal and religious identities to reinforce their domestic legitimacy and thus nationalism is still a highly contested notion.[114] For instance, when the al-Saud family established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through armed conquest over several different tribes, they described the endeavour as a religiously-motivated liberation of territory from a perceptibly un-Islamic form of governance and quickly adopted a deeply socially exclusive doctrine - as their founding ideology.[115] The new state lacked a national identity that could fuel what Buzan calls 'the idea of a state': the ruling family gave its name to the Kingdom, becoming a unique national symbol, a process encouraged in the public discourse from education to the media. In fact, all the GCC ruling families, though at varying degrees, were instrumental in the very foundation of the countries, or, as it has been argued, 'at the heart of the emergent state-building project'.[116] While this strong centralization facilitates a tighter control over narratives on national identity and the discourse on 'legitimacy' as defined by Azar and Moon, the same centralization is an obstacle to 'integration', i.e. socio-political cohesiveness. In other words, by promoting a strongly vertical system, deep polarization and divisions are encouraged at the horizontal level, and the nation-state becomes overall less resilient to threats. This paradigm is likely to be perpetuated until the complicated and costly processes of state and nation building are completed.

Furthermore, these processes do not happen in an international vacuum. The impact of international forces, whether military, political, economic, or

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[113] May Darwich. "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity: Wahhabism Versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2016.
[114] Neil Partrick. "Nationalism in the Gulf States." The Centre for the Study of Global Governance: Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance, and Globalisation in the Gulf States. Research Paper Number 5, October 2009.
[115] Abdullah Hamid Al-Din, "Hawiyya Waṭniyya Saʿūdiyya" [Saudi National Identity]. Al-Hayat, 2014, http://alhayat.com/Opinion/Abdullah-hameed-Al-Deen/4700740. (accessed 9 May 2019)
[116] Partrick, "Nationalism in the Gulf States."

technological, that have a predominant influence in post-colonial contexts, makes a substantial and substantive difference to the fortunes of the state-making enterprise and to the security problematique of younger states.[117] Therefore, a process such as that of globalization, that inevitably makes borders thinner, can become particularly dangerous as it increases transnationalism not only of goods, people and ideas but also of threats. In particular, in the period under consideration here, revolutions, wars and sectarianism have further encouraged phenomena of political fragmentation within states.

2.3.2 Socio-economic vulnerabilities.

The socio-political vulnerabilities identified in the previous paragraph, especially a lack of integration and of a strong idea-of-a-state, often result in contested legitimacy and group fractionalization.[118] Over time, a dysfunctional political economy revolving around the rentier model has blended with those, crystallising major inequalities and imbalances.[119] Although data on the GCC countries is often outdated or unavailable - and substituted by approximate estimates by international organizations or independent firms and researchers - clear trends highlighting self-evident dysfunctional conditions can still emerge. While most of these vulnerabilities are shared, at the structural level, across the six Gulf monarchies, at a more detailed look some indicators present key differences from one country to another.

For instance, on youth unemployment. Notwithstanding the high GDP per capita featured in these countries, unemployment rate in the youth group (15 - 25 years old, the fastest growing segment in the population) [120] was estimated to be, in 2012, between 20 and a staggering 27 percent in Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, while at around 10 percent in the UAE and Kuwait and at less than 2 percent in Qatar.[121] Indeed, for the sake of research, the GCC countries could be divided in two groups: Saudi Arabia/Oman/Bahrain, having lower GDP per capita

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[117] Bahgat Korany, "Strategic Studies and the Third World: A Critical Evaluation," *International Social Science Journal,* (1986), pp. 547-6.

[118] Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, p. 64.

[119] Hertog. "The sociology of the Gulf rentier systems".

[120] Data taken from "The region's demographics: a blessing or a curse" report by Camille Accad for Asiya Investment Group Kuwait (2014)

[121] Julia Craig Romano and Lee Seeger. "Rentierism and Reform: Youth Unemployment and Economic Policy in Oman." *IMES Paper Capstone Series*, The Institute for Middle East Studies, George Washington University, May 2014, p. 43.

and higher unemployment levels and the United Arab Emirates/Kuwait/Qatar which present the highest GDP per capita and lowest unemployment ratio.[122] This division mirrors another indicator, the percentage of foreigners in the total population: data from 2013 shows that above 70 percent of the total population of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar are foreigners, while foreigners represent approximately 30, 40 and 50 percent of the population in Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain.[123] Of course, Saudi Arabia has a population of around million people (2015), while the other GCC countries registered between 1.3 million people (Bahrain) and 9 million people (the United Arab Emirates) in the same year.[124] Still some key trends remain the same across the region. First, that foreigners have moved to the GCC to work in the private sector, which for decades has been utterly dependent on them and is disregarded by nationals, around 80 percent of whom works in the public sector.[125] The preference for a public sector low-demanding job is closely related to a culture of entitlements correlated with citizenship: GCC citizens have been entitled to a cradle-to-grave welfare in exchange for political quiescence for decades.[126] In this sense political and economic status are very closely interrelated, as more benefits are granted to groups that are closer to the rulers or play a role in their patrimonial politics.

Patronage networks are formed across specific groups, tribes, or sects, thus crystallising socio-political fragmentation within nations. This unequal access to opportunities and benefits institutionalizes cleavages among ethno-sectarian segments within the social fabric, one of the main socio-political vulnerabilities of the GCC countries. This is valid when looking at the sectarian divide in countries like Saudi Arabia or Bahrain but also other types of divides such as that between citizens and *bidoons* in Kuwait.

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[122] A similar classification appears in Steffen Hertog, "Arab Gulf States: An Assessment of Nationalisation Policies." *GLMM Research Paper*; 1 (2014), Migration Policy Centre.
[123] "GCC: Total population and percentage of nationals and foreign nationals in GCC countries (national statistics, 2010-2016) (with numbers)", *Gulf Labour Markets and Migration*, European University Institute and Migration Policy Center.
[124] Ibid.
[125] "Percentage of non-nationals in government sector and in private and other sectors in GCC countries (national statistics, latest year or period available)" *Gulf Labour Markets and Migration*, European University Institute and Migration Policy Center.
[126] Steffen Hertog, "The Private Sector and Reform in the Gulf Cooperation Council," research paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance, and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics, July 2013.

By alienating segments of the society, often times knowingly, GCC regimes also may fuel the case for their legitimacy deficit with marginalised minorities, thus paving the way for the politicisation of internal fault-lines. In its empirical part, this thesis will highlight the connection between these different vulnerabilities as well as their impact on the process of threat perception at the level of decision-makers.

2.4 Categorizing threats.

Once an issue has been defined as a threat, categorizing it in a way that describes its nature, type and dimensions is the next fundamental exercise for any policy-maker in order to orchestrate the most effective and appropriate response. It is all-the-more for scholars who set for themselves the objective of studying threats and their perceptions. To this end, the researcher has developed an original system of threat categorization, one that tries to take into account, update and systematize, the findings of the relevant literature, the policy-related documents coming from the region and empirical observations. Each threat examined in the empirical part of this thesis will be categorised according to this original system: this will allow to acknowledge whether a same threat is perceived as having, similar causes, dimensions and implications across the six countries of the GCC.

2.4.1 Widening the perspective.

The most basic distinction operated in security studies scholarship is that between external and internal threats: as it will be made clear later, this simplistic categorization may not be entirely fitting in the contemporary reality of the GCC countries. While the literature on the security of the 'Third World' argued that the insecurity from which these states suffer emanates to a substantial degree from within their boundaries rather than from outside[127], the history of the foreign and defence policy of the GCC countries is one that constantly shows consideration of two external threats, namely Iraq and Iran, as the two main sources of danger

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[127] Mohammed Ayoob and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "Leadership and Security in South-East Asia: Exploring General Propositions," in Mohammed Ayoob and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, eds., *Leadership Perceptions and National Security: The Southeast Asian Experience* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 1989, p. 256.

to the monarchies.[128] Furthermore, already during the Cold War, within the framework of national security, constructivist scholars pointed to the existence of ideological threats, that could of be external or internal nature, including with the reference to the countries of the MENA region.[129] This was the case also for the GCC countries, whereby ideology such as Iraq's pan-Arabism and Iran's Khomeinism, emerged as grave threats with respect to the subversive message these ideologies addressed to the GCC's own population, in the 1960s and 1980s respectively.[130] These works opened up the scholarly debate to considering the existence of threats that weren't exclusively external or internal in their nature, something that indeed applies very well to a region where transnationalism is so strong, and security interdependence so solid. However, still threats were only predominantly categorised into two dimensions: material and ideational. It was only after the Cold War that the most significant turning point in the categorization of threats has occurred, with the widening of the perspective away from the traditional assumptions.

The introduction of new types of threats owes particularly to the work of Barry Buzan, who distinguished between five types: military threats - i.e. seizure of territory, invasion, occupation - that can be direct or against external interests of the state; economic threats – i.e. export or import restrictions, default on debt, economic instability - ; societal threats - i.e. damages to domestic stability and cohesion ; ecological threats – i.e. environment's deterioration; political threats – such as penetration by a hostile party or ideological competition, that can be international and exogenous or structural and endogenous.[131] While political and military threats had already been more commonly discussed and therefore easier to spot and disentangle, economic, societal and ecological threats were somehow new concepts and at times harder to identify. Buzan himself pointed out the difficulty to determine, for example, the threshold of what is acceptable in the economic realm, based on an inherent instability of the liberalised market economy, and what is a threat.[132] Societal threats can also be ambiguous to consider, but substantially relevant to the GCC countries, and all other 'weak

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[128] See for instance Koch and Long (eds.) *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century*.
[129] Michael N. Barnett, "Sovereignty, nationalism, and regional order in the Arab states system." *International Organization* 49.03 (1995): pp. 479-510.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Buzan. *People, States and Fear*.
[132] Ibid.

states', i.e. states with a contested founding ideology or a divisive identity. Moreover the long-neglected societal dimension of threat acquired increasingly a key relevance, as most of the contemporary conflicts since the 1990s show a strong societal element, descending often cases into ethnic conflict and civil wars. Civil wars plagued Europe – most noticeably the Balkans -, Africa – Rwanda, Congo, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone among others – Asia – i.e. Georgia, Chechnya - and have been particularly common in the MENA region – Lebanon and Algeria in the recent past, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Iraq still today. Finally, while when thinking of possible ecological threats, one often thinks of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, the term ecological threat is also referred to man-made phenomena such as global warming, pollution and poisoning.

To Buzan, any formulation of a security agenda that doesn't take into account these multiple dimensions would be partial and leave the flank of the state vulnerable to insecurity. As he points out the 'five sectors do not operate in isolation from each other. Each defines a focal point within the security problematique, and a way of ordering priorities, but all are woven together in a strong web of linkage'[133]. The clearest example, to which Buzan makes reference, is the substantial interrelation between military, economic and political threats. Military threats can not only put into question the very basic duty of a state to exercise the political power effectively, paving the way for political enemies, but they also have a heavy impact on the state's economic security, often triggering economic threats. Furthermore, ecological threats can trigger societal or economic ones – for example when desertification threatens the resources of a country or endangers the livelihood of a community – and societal threats can easily spill over into military and political threats. For example, some have convincingly argued that a severe drought substantially eroding the economic conditions of Syria is to be included in the broad set of factors triggering the conflict erupted there in 2011.[134]

Since the idea of widening the scope of security has disseminated several countries, particularly in the West, reacted in their security strategy documents

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[133] Buzan, "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty- First Century", p. 433.
[134] Peter H. Gleick, "Water, drought, climate change, and conflict in Syria." *Weather, Climate, and Society* 6.3 (2014): p. 331-340.

including many new non-military, soft security threats such as those afore-mentioned. For example, the 2004 United Nations' Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change reflected this widening of the security distinguishing among six clusters of threats, including economic and social threats, and mentioning specifically poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation.[135] Interestingly, also the studies on the defence doctrines of the GCC countries have gone, a few years later, into a similar direction.[136]

In 2002 Prince Naef bin Ahmed al-Saud, a Colonel in the Saudi Armed Forces with responsibilities for the strategic planning in the Kingdom, delineated as assets to be protected by Saudi security policy 'territorial integrity, economic wellbeing, cultural values and fundamental beliefs, and the system of government.'[137] Viewed through Buzan's lenses, the document warns against military, economic, societal and political threats. In addition, the author is concerned with both external and internal threats, which he considers closely linked, and makes explicit reference to regional stability as a key value of the country's security calculus. For example, it cites the repercussions of Saddam Hussein's possible fall, specifically 'either a fragmented Iraq or the emergence of a new regime in Baghdad committed to redrawing its borders' as a 'threat in the making'.[138] Arguing that change in other countries can impact regional stability, the document underlines the security interdependence of the Gulf as a regional security sub-complex. It is interesting to also explore the centrality of cultural factors - protecting Wahhabi Islam as the source of national identity and monarchical legitimacy - as crucial to shaping Saudi (societal) stability, a word used almost as a synonym for security. Also quite relevant is the reference to the threats to Saudi Arabia's economic assets, trade routes and offshore oilfields, vulnerable because dependent on the safety of the sea. In a 2014 study, so a few

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[135] Kenneth M. Manusama, "The High Level Panel Report on Threats, Challenges and Change and the Future Role of the United Nations Security Council." *Leiden Journal of International Law* 18.03 (2005): pp. 605-620.

[136] In the impossibility of accessing Defence White Papers or National Security Strategies from the GCC countries, as those are not published, the author has researched studies authored by either government or security officials or advisors thereof.

[137] Prince Naef bin Ahmed Al-Saud,"Underpinning Saudi National Security Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Autumn 2002, pp. 124-130.

[138] Ibid., p. 126.

years after 2011, Nawaf Obaid, a long time special counsellor to Saudi ambassadors and the Royal Court, shaped his own suggestions for a new Saudi Defence Doctrine.[139] Obaid argues that a new defence doctrine for Saudi Arabia is made necessary by the decline of Western interventionism and that it should focus both on threats to Saudi Arabia - border security, terrorist acts and jihadist ideology - and to the wider region, by protecting the country's international status and its strategic partnerships.[140] Obaid's work also includes Iraq and Iran as traditional sources military and political threats. Finally Obaid makes a distinction between threats emanating from conventional and from asymmetrical warfare, i.e. terrorism. Defining the latter as the most important security threat throughout the Gulf for the foreseeable future, Obaid describes it as both an endogenous threat, related to the economically and socially disenfranchised population prey of extremist rhetoric, and an exogenous one, in the form of operations sponsored by hostile powers to destabilize GCC governments.[141]

Similar documents from the early 2000s related to other GCC countries - such as those authored by security officials from the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait - unfolded along very similar lines, speaking about defence of the homeland, protecting the economic wellbeing, fighting terrorism and conventional military threats and preserving domestic and regional political stability.[142] In 2017 Hussein Ibish, senior scholar of a think tank with ties to the UAE leadership, the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, authored a document under the title "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy".[143] In the document, he argues that the Arab uprisings in 2011 have been a watershed moment in terms of hyper-securitization. With specific reference to identified threats, the author mentions:

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[139] Nawaf Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine", Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, 2014, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/Saudi%20Strategic%20Doctrine%20-%20web.pdf (accessed 15 May 2019).

[140] Interestingly the objectives pointed out in Obaid's paper have been largely repeated by HRH Navy Captain (Ret.) Prince Sultan bin Khalid Al-Faisal Al Sa'ud in his speech "Analyzing and Assessing Saudi Arabian Defense Strategy" held on the 6th of October 2015, at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Washington, DC.

[141] Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine", p. 11.

[142] Major Musallam M. Al Rashedi, "The UAE National Security Strategy in the 21st Century", United States Marine Corps, School of Advance Warfighting, Marine Corps University, Thesis, 2005; Col. Badea Al Raqum "A New Approach for Kuwait's National Defense Strategy", Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, 2001.

[143] Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, Issue Paper #4 (2017).

the extension of Iran's regional influence in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon or the GCC itself; the domestic or regional empowerment of Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood; terrorist organizations including al-Qa'ida, Daesh, Hezbollah.

In addition to providing an idea of the security priorities of the GCC countries in contemporary times, all of these documents also elaborate, explicitly or implicitly, on the growing transnationalism of threats that makes boundaries between internal and external threats increasingly blurred, without however offering a specific systematization to conceptualize analytically this interrelation. Even the area studies literature has only marginally addressed this question. Although, as previously described, area experts have provided very comprehensive analyses and accounts on the various threats to the GCC, little attention has been dedicated to the relations among them and their interconnectedness.[144] Often times these are presented and analysed as distinct, stand-alone issues. On the contrary this study argues that just as conflicts – threats' endgames - are rarely, if ever, attributable to single causes, also threat analyses should look at issues in a holistic way and consider the multitude of layers, dimensions and sources for each of them.

2.4.2 Multi-dimensional, multi-layered.

Overall, resting on Buzan's work, and building on policy indications and the region-specific studies exposed, there is room to put forward a renewed framework on the categorization of threats in the GCC region, with the aim of providing a tool for a more systematized yet comprehensive understanding of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional threats consolidated after 2011.

In fact, as Kristian Ulrichsen argued in 2017, the 'outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 and regional responses to the broader political upheaval across the Middle East and North Africa gave urgency to the porous relationship between internal and external security'.[145] Drawing attention to globalisation as an accelerator of

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[144] Kristian Ulrichsen is among the very few who have written about all of the different threats here mentioned and how external and internal threats are connected. See Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. "Internal and external security in the Arab Gulf states." *Middle East Policy* 16.2 (2009) and Kristian Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security" in Kristian Ulrichsen (ed), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, (London: Hurst), 2017.

[145] Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security", p. 27.

transnationalism, Ulrichsen further argues that the rise of cross-boundaries oppositional movements and non-state actors has highlighted how 'the internal and external dimensions of security in the Gulf were interconnected and bound together in the 2000s as never before'.[146] Reflecting on these circumstances, rather than arguing that threats should be categorised only as external or internal, it seems more fitting to speak also of intermestic threats. The term intermestic has been employed only by a few scholars, including Victor Cha who defines intermestic issues as the 'interpenetration of foreign and domestic issues'.[147] Similarly, this research will speak of three types of threats: external threats, or threats originated from external sources that affect the international interests of the country; internal threats, or threats that have endogenous roots and affect the internal stability of the country; intermestic threats, or threats that have a mixed external and internal nature, such as those moved by exogenous motives but spreading internally and having domestic implications and, vice versa, those that have endogenous stimula but repercussions on the international interests of the country. Although scarcely conceptualized, there is a strong relation between the identified types of threats. These can be looked at according to a 'nested boxes' scheme, an image which help conceptualising how they are separated and yet interdependent. For example, when an external threat materialises in what Buzan calls 'weak state', it can easily instigate endogenous instability, that could irreversibly expose internal structural weaknesses of the state.

Each of the three types of threats can then manifest in the five dimensions indicated by Buzan: political, military, economic, societal, environmental, depending on the object of the threat. Not every threat shows all five – or six – dimensions and in specific instances one dimension may well be more obvious than the others. As elaborated in the previous section, in the specific context of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, this research argues that each and every threat, to be defined as such, has to show a clear-cut political dimension, or, in other words, should present a manifest, even if long-term, political danger. This dimension has therefore the pre-eminence over the others. However, it is relevant to point out that it is increasingly more common for a danger to show multiple dimensions. It is impossible, for instance, to rationalize the perception of Iran's

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[146] Victor Cha, "Globalization and the Study of International Security", *Journal of Peace Research*, 37(3), 2000, p. 391.
[147] Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security", p. 23.

influence in the region exclusively as a political and military threat, overlooking the factor of Iran's potential as an economic competitor.

2.5 Hypothesizing on prioritization.

Not many scholars have worked on proposing clear and testable hypotheses about how states prioritize among and react to different kinds of threats. Walt, one of the first authors working extensively on the subject, provides no guidance as to how states prioritize among the various threats when arguing that: 'One cannot determine *a priori* … which sources of threat will be most important in any given case; one can say only that all of them are likely to play a role.'[148] Since then the area literature has found a consensus that, particularly in the GCC, the priority is accorded to regime security, but refrained from offering detailed assumptions on which type of threats can potentially be more salient in that context.[149] In his work on identity politics in the region, Barnett also backs away from a clear statement about how Middle Eastern states prioritize among different kinds of threats, arguing: 'Far from suggesting the primacy of identity and the irrelevance of material forces, I recognize that both are important explanatory variables, though with different causal weights at different historical moments.'[150] Except when a state actually brandishes military force against another state, or possesses a clear aggregate power advantage and hostile intentions, it might be complex to identify the gravest and most imminent threat to a regime. The matter becomes less clear in an environment like the contemporary MENA region, where threats are multidimensional and emanate simultaneously but from different sources.

One form of guidance, that might be relevant to this multidimensional context, comes from Gregory Gause who, focusing on the issue significantly, provides a testable hypothesis on which threat is most likely to be perceived as the most dangerous to stability, working to prove it with ample historical references.[151] With

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[148] Walt, *Origins of Alliance*, p. 25

[149] Steven David, "Explaining third world alignment." *World Politics* 43.02 (1991): pp. 233-256.

[150] Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab politics: negotiations in regional order.* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1998, p 123.

[151] Gause, "Balancing What?"

specific reference to Saudi Arabia, Gause considers cases when two types of threat, external attack and internal destabilization, happen simultaneously and yet are de-linked. He contends that in many instances in recent Gulf history, leaders seem to perceive the domestic-destabilization threat as more serious and immediate than the classic power-capabilities threat. His reference is that if military power considerations dominated Saudi alignment behaviour, one would have expected to see Riyadh balancing against Iraq at the outset of the 1980s and at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Instead, Saudis balanced against Iran, the state exhibiting the greater degree of hostile intentions toward their own regime, whether that state had the military power to back that hostility up or not. This to the extent that Gulf regimes underestimated the threat of military attack, as, for example, Kuwait's rulers in 1990 did not think that Saddam Hussein aimed at militarily occupying their country. He argues that, while both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were not comfortable with a victorious Iraq, they both supported Saddam Hussein because they had cooperative relations with the Iraqi regime dating back to the 1975 Algiers Accord, while after the Islamic revolution relations with Iran had degenerated in hostility.[152] Even after the end of the war and until the invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia continued its alignment with Iraq against Iran, despite the relative increase in Iraqi power compared to Iran's. To prove that, Gause highlights that Saudi military expenditures fell from approximately $20 billion a year in the 1980s to an average of $6 billion a year in the 1990s.[153] Indeed, attempting to compensate for their armies' limitations, the GCC countries have been among the world's highest spenders in military procurement, and, interestingly, spending seem to have followed threat perceptions and can, therefore, be used to measure those. Overall, while reference to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is frequently used in the region to argue that it should be no surprise that Gulf leaders worry about the military power of their neighbours, Gause's work validated the hypothesis that they prioritise domestic threats to regime stability, especially if originated abroad, such as abetted by foreign actors. These kind of threats as described by Gause are what this study calls intermestic threats. The hypothesis is that they are seen as particularly salient and efficacious because of

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[152] A quite comprehensive account of the history of Saudi support for Iraq in the 1980s can be found in Ghazi Algosaibi, *The Gulf Crisis: An Attempt to Understand* (London: Kegan Paul), 1993, pp. 28–29.
[153] Aaron Karp. "Military Procurement and Regional Security in South Asia." *Contemporary Asia* (1998): pp. 334-362.

the strength of trans-border political identities and the multitude of transnational links that have previously enabled mobilization of people across borders in the Gulf region. In examining each threat in the empirical sections of this thesis, this researcher will also try to determine if regimes do indeed prioritize intermestic, external or internal threats and why.

2.6 Methodology.

Given that access to data and information can be difficult in the concerned region, the researcher has drafted a flexible research strategy, relying on first-hand experience in the area studied. The envisioned strategy includes a combination of the quantitative and qualitative research methods and the reliance on both theoretical knowledge and empirical data.

Quantitative data of interest will be drawn by statistics and surveys conducted by national or international institutions. The measurement of quantitative data can be particularly helpful in unpacking the magnitude and details of socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities in each of the different countries.

Qualitative data of interest will be deducted from foreign and domestic policies analysis, discourse analysis - including social media content - and interviews of key informants.

Conducting analyses on the GCC's foreign and defence policies in the past has traditionally been a problematic effort, given the absence of an open debate within these countries about security strategies and the lack of white papers or similar documents. The post-2011 assertivism and protagonism of the GCC monarchies in the region, from Tunisia to Yemen, can therefore be helpful as it provides substantially more material for foreign policy analysis and leaves less to speculation. Although documents concerning security policies are not available, whenever possible the researcher will keep into consideration leaked official documents or diplomatic/political communications. Chiefly, among them, the researcher will consider the leaked security documents known as "Riyadh Agreements", which offer a unique window into an official recognition of the issues identified as threats after 2011 by the signatory governments.

Alongside performing an analysis of foreign and domestic policies, instrumental in unpacking the order of prioritization and the shaping of perceptions, the author will be conducting an analysis of discourses, including: official statements, extracts from speeches and direct or indirect testimonies or key actors within decision-makers' circles available in online and offline publications.

Finally, the research will also rely on fieldwork, specifically interviews with participants who are aware about the decision-making process and leadership perceptions in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar. This category includes GCC and non-GCC academics or analysts within think tanks - especially those focusing on security, political and economic affairs - and, where possible, diplomats and officials from within GCC countries' political institutions, such as local councils, Parliamentary bodies, governmental offices. Given the context of heightened security perceptions in the region, interviews will be pseudonymised to avoid putting interviewees' at risk and allow them to speak more candidly. The researcher is also aware of the challenge of receiving biased testimonies when relying on interviews with primary sources in the region object of this study, especially when informants are close to the decision-making circles. Acknowledging the sources' political agenda will therefore be as important as distinguishing verifiable information from biased arguments framed into politicised narratives. However, it is worth reiterating that rather than on an objective assessment of the GCC's security equation, this thesis focuses on the perception of threats at the level of the regimes, in a region with a highly centralised decision-making process.

The data gathered from primary and secondary sources will be then analysed through the original theoretical framework drafted by the researcher to measure them against the research hypotheses. The literature on area studies will be consistently used as a reference to: place the analysis in an historico-political context and highlight factors shaping the perceptions as identified in this chapter, including those related to identity, culture and systemic features of the countries object of the study. This process will be followed in all the six chapters of this study's empirical part, whose core part is revolving around the issues at the centre of the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises – namely, the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadi organizations and Iran-supported Shi'a groups. The relevance of these cases to investigate divergent perceptions across the GCC will be detailed in the

following chapter. Then, in all six empirical chapters, the first paragraph will be dedicated to measuring the impact of the so-called Arab Spring on the leadership's security perceptions, as a central argument of this thesis is that during and after the uprisings is when the fragmentation of the security calculus across the GCC regimes has crystallised. The last paragraph will instead be dedicated to highlighting which issue has been perceived as a priority threat in each country in the period 2011-2017, why, and how it relates to those at the centre of the intra-GCC crises. Finally, in the last chapter of the thesis, the researcher will summarize the findings of the thesis, both as it pertains to the original thereotical notions and paradigms introduced and in terms of the evolution of the security calculus and threat perceptions in the six GCC countries, highlighting roots and drivers of security perceptions across the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and the core elements shaping their process of prioritization.

3.0 CHAPTER THREE: THE INTRA-GCC CRISES AND THE THESIS' CASE STUDIES.

One of the main hypotheses of this thesis is that the popular uprisings of 2011 triggered a watershed series of events that greatly impacted the security perceptions of the GCC monarchies. These events, in their national chapters, brought to the surface the different socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities of the individual countries which, interpreted by the leaders' perceptions, accelerated the fragmentation of their security calculus, setting the monarchies on a collision course that is extraordinary in the context of the GCC's history.

In fact, threats and security perceptions are so central to the GCC and intra-GCC relations that, as explored thoroughly in this thesis' literature review, the GCC itself is widely regarded as a body created for collective defence against common threats.[154] The common argument in the relevant literature is that events such as the emergence in 1979 of a revolutionary regime in Tehran with expansionist intent and the subsequent outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980, were perceived as threatening the very survival of the GCC monarchies: by coming together, the six monarchies wanted to present something of a common front to common security needs.[155] Academics specialising in area studies have therefore often looked at the security of the bloc as inextricably interdependent, almost a unitary good named 'Gulf or GCC security'.[156]

Over the years, scholars have also acknowledged some of the limits that prevented the GCC from becoming an effective organism for collective security, mainly revolving around national sovereignty concerns and mutual mistrust, in

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[154] This argument is found in most of the relevant literature, and argued at length in: Matteo Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*; Abdul Khaleq Abdulla. "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature Origin, and Process." in Michael C. Hudson (ed.) *Middle East dilemma: The politics and economics of Arab integration* (New York: Columbia University Press),1999, p. 150.

[155] Ibid.

[156] This argument is found in most of the relevant literature, and argued at length in: Christian Koch, "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization." Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, *KAS International Reports* (2010): pp. 24-35; Naff, *Gulf Security and the Iran-Iraq war*; John E. Peterson, "The Historical Pattern of Gulf Security." *Security in the Persian Gulf*. (Washington: Palgrave Macmillan US), 2002, pp. 7-31.

particular towards the hegemonic stature of Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis the smaller monarchies.[157] However, the existence of a common perception and prioritization of threats among the six members of the bloc has rarely been questioned, including in the literature produced in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, when the GCC states were largely thought to align and balance against internal threats coming from the upheavals, specifically those in Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia.[158] In fact, most of the literature dissecting such impacts argued that while at the regional level the GCC countries' response to the events of 2011 were markedly divergent, the Council's members closed ranks in a display of shared security priorities to push back against change when protests reached their own backyard.[159]

As a matter of fact, efforts towards cooperation and integration did accelerate in 2011 and 2012, but those appeared tactical rather than strategic measures. In March 2011 troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Force, entered Bahrain at the request of the King to quell the riots that were threatening the rule of the royal family.[160] In November 2012, amid years-long hesitations from Kuwait, the six governments signed the GCC Internal Security Pact, empowering each GCC country to take legal action, based on its own legislation, against citizens, residents, or organized groups that are linked to crime, terrorism or dissension in any other GCC state.[161] Among other things, the Pact specifically calls to: integrate the security apparatuses and operational commands during times of disturbances and disasters (Article 10) and allow security forces to enter into the territory of another signatory state - the distance based on bilateral agreements between parties - during pursuits of wanted individuals (Article 14).[162]

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[157] See for instance: Partrick, "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?"; John Peterson, "Sovereignty and Boundaries in the Gulf States: Settling the Peripheries" in Kamrava, *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*.

[158] Daniel Odinius and Philipp Kuntz. "The limits of authoritarian solidarity: The Gulf monarchies and preserving authoritarian rule during the Arab Spring." *European Journal of Political Research* 54.4 (2015): pp. 639-654; Silvia Colombo. "The GCC and the Arab Spring: A Tale of Double Standards." *The International Spectator* 47.4 (2012): pp. 110-126.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Yoel Guzansky. "Defence cooperation in the Arabian Gulf: The Peninsula Shield Force put to the test." *Middle Eastern Studies* 50.4 (2014): pp. 640-654.

[161] The pact wasn't made public but details were leaked from the local press. See for example "GCC Security Pact: Kuwait holding back" in *Al Akhbar*, 6 March 2015.

[162] Ibid.

If on one hand these instances speak of a momentum for cooperation and coordination, this appears limited to short-term policing, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism at the inter-state level, rather than paving the road for establishing a full-fledged common security front. The Peninsula Shield intervention in Bahrain in 2011, although justified with the 2000 GCC Joint Defense Agreement, did not include all of the GCC countries: Kuwait only sent a small naval contingent with surveillance tasks, while Oman and Qatar sent only two advisors each.[163] The 2012 Internal Security Pact, while very robust, is limited to domestic security and, by contrast, it highlights how the most substantial initiative in cooperative external security, the establishment of a GCC ballistic missile defence architecture and early warning system, although encouraged by the United States since 1998 and pushed remarkably in 2015, has never seen the light.[164]

Finally, of particular interest is the idea of upgrading the Council to a Gulf Union, circulating among the GCC leaders since the 1980s and brought to the forefront again by Saudi Arabia since 2011 as its Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal argued that 'threats of all kinds require the hard works of the GCC countries to shift from a current formula of cooperation to a union formula'.[165] The proposal was supported by Bahrain but met a half-hearted response from the other countries, vowing to put it on hold.[166] When, in 2013, Saudi Arabia decided to discuss the subject again, Oman formally and publicly rejected its participation to a potential Union, effectively sinking the idea, to the relief of officials in Qatar and Kuwait as well.[167] In fact, not only the 2011 turmoil didn't lead to a deepening of GCC integration, it actually led to further divisions within the GCC.

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[163] Guzansky. "Defence cooperation in the Arabian Gulf" p. 648.

[164] Peppino DeBiaso. "Missile Defense and the GCC: Strengthening Deterrence through a New Framework." *Harvard International Review* 37.3 (2016): P. 89.

[165] Prince Saud Al Faisal's speech was delivered on 28 April 2012 at the conference 'The Conference of Gulf Youth, Arab Gulf States From Cooperation to Union,' in Riyadh. It can be read at "Toward a Union Formula – Prince Saud Al Faisal" on the website of the Saudi-US Relations Information Service, http://susris.com/2012/04/30/toward-a-union-formula-%E2%80%93-prince-saud-al-faisal/ (accessed 14 January 2018); "Saudi call for Gulf union faces hurdles at GCC summit", *Reuters*, 10 December 2013.

[166] Miller, "Managing Regional Conflict: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Embargo of Qatar."; Abdullah Baabood. "The Future of the GCC Amid the Gulf Divide." in Krieg (ed), *Divided Gulf*, pp. 161-178;

[167] Ibid., p. 169

The assumption on post-2011 shared threat perceptions in the GCC must in fact be questioned in light of the two intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017, the gravest in the three decades of the Council's existence, when divergences in the security perceptions emerged unequivocally to the public eye.[168] It will here be argued, specifically, that the unique circumstances represented by these crises also offer privileged conditions to observe how GCC security perceptions have been impacted by the 2011 uprisings.

In order to explain and validate the choices made in this thesis as case studies, this section will first explore the background of intra-GCC relations, evaluating them specifically with reference to the security domain. Secondarily the study will delve directly into an analysis of the intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017 and their disruptive nature, highlighting the reasons and features that make these crises unique in GCC history as well as exhaustively pertinent to the main research questions of this study. Finally, the last paragraphs will be dedicated to the analysis of the Riyadh Agreements, featuring in full as Appendix A, Appendix B and Appendix C of this study, which represent rare official written documents elaborating on the security perceptions of their signatories. Subsequently, the research will delve into the specific demands raised by the anti-Qatar camp in 2017 and the affiliated blacklists of actors deemed as 'threatening Gulf security', thus providing further details on the thesis' case studies.

3.1 Is the GCC a security community, a security complex, or neither?

The history of the relations among the six GCC monarchies is abundant with instances of cooperation and unity, as well as controversies and divisions. This dichotomy can be found even in the circumstances of the very foundation of the modern states. When the British forces announced their withdrawal from the region 'East of Suez' in 1968, the leaders of the small littoral emirates of the Gulf – today's UAE, Bahrain and Qatar - released a communique announcing a 'Federation of Arab Emirates' to 'take effect from March 30, 1968.'[169] Ultimately, however, while the seven Trucial States formed the United Arab Emirates, Qatar

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[168] Mohammed Ahmad Naheem. "The dramatic rift and crisis between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of June 2017." *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance* (2017): pp. 1-13.
[169] William D. Brewer, "Yesterday and Tomorrow in the Persian Gulf," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1969), p. 154.

and Bahrain went separate ways, unable to overcome centuries-old conflictual relations and territorial claims.[170] Of course, Bahrain and Qatar were not the only proto-GCC countries entangled in conflictual relations and issues of contested sovereignty.[171] Indeed these states are so young that several outstanding border issues were resolved only in the 2000s with the 2003 UAE - Oman boundary agreement and the finalization of the demarcation agreement on maritime borders by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 2000.[172] In fact, as Louise Fawcett has noted, because the GCC see themselves as young nation-states that only recently, historically speaking, obtained their independence, 'sovereignty was a prize to be nurtured, not one to be sacrificed on the altar of a pan-Arab movement, or one that extolled the virtues of integration.'[173]

Such perspective would be explicative as to why, while the GCC was primarily formed as a common defence mechanism, security and defence cooperation remained chronically underdeveloped.[174] The collective military force named Peninsula Shield Forces highlighted a divergence of purposes within the GCC since its creation in 1984, with Saudi Arabia and Oman hoping that it would emerge as a competent force able to contribute to regional self-defence, and the smaller GCC monarchies preferring to rely on the more effective external, primarily American, assistance.[175] In fact, hesitations to commit to a GCC-wide large military standing force have been explained with the concerns that such force would likely be led and dominated by Saudi Arabia and could possibly be used at some stage to even intimidate and influence the others.[176] This fear, in turn, pushed individual GCC member states to have security arrangements or defence pacts with external actors like the United States or NATO, to balance

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[170] Malcolm C. Peck, *The United Arab Emirates: A Venture in Unity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 49–52

[171] Ibid.

[172] Peterson, "Sovereignty and Boundaries in the Gulf States".

[173] Louise Fawcett, "Alliances, Cooperation and Regionalism in the Middle East", in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009, p. 196.

[174] For the original charter, refer to the website of the GCC under http://www.gcc-sg.org/ (accessed 24 May 2019) and for a collection of statements from ruling elites cfr. John Peterson, "The GCC and Regional Security," in John A. Sandwick, ed., *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Moderation and Stability in an Interdependent World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 1986, pp. 171-173.

[175] Guzansky. "Defence cooperation in the Arabian Gulf", p. 642

[176] Joseph Kostiner, "GCC Perceptions of Collective Security in the Post-Saddam Era." in Mehrava, *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, p. 102.

against Saudi interference, in what Gerd Nonneman calls 'omni-balancing'.[177] The case of the Peninsula Shield is exemplary of a difficulty to integrate security institutions which extends to the failure to establish effective, impactful, centralised commands as much as to the failure to integrate defence systems.[178] This poor level of integration in security and defence policies and institutions has long been the main arguments against defining the GCC countries a security community[179], i.e. 'a group of states sharing values, identities - and agendas - tied together by supranational formal and informal links and collective security mechanisms, which are sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful interaction among the group members.'[180]

Such idea has nonetheless been at the centre of a lively debate in the academic community. For instance, one of the arguments made was that considering foreign policy choices, the GCC can be considered a heterogeneous security community.[181] This is argued by Christian Koch who, in 2010, wrote that 'the monarchies have moved beyond the minimalist conception of an association - based on the lowest common denominator principle - towards a broader and more inclusive concept of the GCC as a regional organization coordinating strategy and policy'.[182] On one hand, the GCC has behaved more often as a cohesive group in its alignment with West, its mistrust vis-à-vis its neighbouring Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict.[183] On the other hand, there have been notable exceptions, including Oman's good relations with Iran, and Qatar's *de facto* recognition of the state of Israel in 1996, when an Israeli trade representation office was opened in Doha.[184] Moreover, the conflictual foreign policies pursued by the six GCC countries in the post-Arab Spring era, pitting pro-Islamist directly

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[177] Gerd Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy: 'Omnibalancing' and 'Relative Autonomy' in Multiple Environments," in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, (New York: New York University Press), 2005, pp. 315–351.

[178] Guzansky. "Defence cooperation in the Arabian Gulf", p. 646

[179] See for example Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*.

[180] The definition of security communities has been forged in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, ed., *Security Communities*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1998*.*

[181] See for example Christian Koch. "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization."

[182] Ibid., p. 33

[183] Ibid.

[184] Uzi Rabi, "Qatar's Relations with Israel: Challenging Arab and Gulf Norms", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Summer, 2009), pp. 443-459; A comprehensive analysis of the Sultanate's foreign policy in the context of Iraq and Iran is provided in Joseph A. Kechichian *Oman and the world: The emergence of an independent foreign policy*. Rand Corporation, 1995

against anti-Islamist players, definitively challenge the argument of a foreign policy coordination as related to the contemporary times.[185] In 1998 Gause and Barnett had also underlined the potential for the future establishment of an identifiable 'security community' in the GCC, based on the formation of a 'khaliji' identity, encouraged by GCC policies on social exchanges building on existing socio-cultural links, including a common language, similar social and religious customs and traditions and family and tribal kinship.[186] However if such 'shared khaliji identity' could, in theory, provide fertile ground for the development of an 'identifiable security community' it evidently did not represent a compelling case towards its development, as it could not prevent of the eruption of the gravest political crisis in the history of the GCC, in June 2017, nor facilitate its resolution. As a matter of fact even economic integration - underpinned by supranational institutions for policy coordination as much as by the introduction of a Customs Union in 2002, the proposal for a common market in 2008, the introduction of a region-wide electricity grid and common transport and infrastructure projects - did not present an unsurmountable obstacle to the economic boycott against Qatar in 2017, but rather, as will be explained, an enabling factor.

All this considered, this researcher rejects the definition of the GCC as a security community and joins several other scholars who analyse the entire Persian Gulf (the GCC, Yemen, Iraq and Iran) as a sub-complex from the larger MENA region.[187] In fact, the area studies literature dealing with security issues looks, in most cases, at the entire Middle East and North Africa region as a regional security complex, i.e., as defined by Barry Buzan, a geographic area in which members have intense security interdependence and frequent, positive or negative, interactions.[188] Some literature even defines specifically GCC security

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[185] See: Krieg (ed), *Divided Gulf.*

[186] Michael Barnett, and Gregory Gause. "Caravans in opposite directions society, state and the development of a community in the Gulf Cooperation Council." *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* 62.1 (1998): pp. 161-197.

[187] The same Barry Buzan referes to the Persian Gulf as a sub-complex in Ole Waever and Barry Buzan. *Regions and Powers.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2003. Among the area scholars an example of this conceptualization is in Cilja Harders, and Matteo Legrenzi (eds). *Beyond Regionalism?: regional cooperation, regionalism and regionalization in the Middle East.* (London: Ashgate Publishing), 2013.

[188] The regional security complex theory first appears in Barry Buzan*, People, States and Fear* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991). The area studies literature has usually referred the concept to the whole MENA region. See: Halliday. *The Middle East in international relations;* Raymond Hinnebusch. *The international politics of the Middle*

as an extension of Arab national security as a whole, while other area specialists look at the Persian Gulf as a stand-alone regional security complex.[189] This researcher argues that looking at the Persian Gulf region as an independent complex would be misleading, because all the Persian Gulf states, individually, can be described as members of the larger MENA system. The swiftness with which the 2011 uprisings were able to spread from Tunisia all the way to Bahrain and Yemen is a primary example of how interconnected is the security of the countries of this region. At the same time, arguably, looking at the dynamics in the Gulf exclusively as an extension of events taking place in the larger MENA system would be a limitation and an analytical hazard. Regional events do tend to have serious impacts in the Gulf, including at times tipping the balance of issues that are purely domestic, but foor an accurate perspective it is more helpful to focus on circumstances in the Persian Gulf itself, where all events tend to have swift and measurable impacts, of a consequential nature, on its members and thus consider the group of states as a sub-complex of the larger MENA region. Several instances show just how intertwined are the security dynamics in the Gulf, ranging from the impact of the Iranian revolution or the formation of the GCC to the reverberations of the 2003 Iraq war on Iran-GCC relations, to the weight of civil wars in Yemen on the policies of Saudi Arabia and Oman.[190]

Still, the eruption of the 2014 and 2017 crises is, arguably, evidence that the sub-regional level of analysis is not sufficient to decode the GCC security perceptions. It is thereby here argued that GCC security is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but instead a complex matrix of domestic and regional factors each playing a distinctive role in formulating the definition, categorisation, perception and prioritisation of threats. While acknowledging substantial regional commonalities and bonds, this research also intends to fully appreciate the many domestic specificities of individual countries. For example, while the six countries are all absolute monarchies slowly introducing measures for limited political representation, the political system in Kuwait guarantees a much higher degree

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East. (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 2003; Fred Lawson. *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2006.

[189] The Gulf is described as an extension of Arab-wide security in: Jamal Al-Suweidi (ed.). *Arabian Gulf Security: Internal and External Challenges*; Abd al-Khaleq Abdullah, *"The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature Origin, and Process."*. Among those who define the Persian Gulf as a stand-alone security complex is Ulrichsen in *Insecure Gulf*.

[190] Fred Halliday. *Arabia without Sultans*; Anoushiravan Ehteshami. *Dynamics of change in the Persian Gulf: political economy, war and revolution*. (London: Routledge), 2013.

of representation than in all of the other countries.[191] The macro-economic indicators in the region have grown across the years even more different, with those of Saudi Arabia not comparable to that of Bahrain and those of Qatar not comparable to those of Oman.[192] From a historical point of view, Oman's and Bahrain's pre-XVIII century history have a much more international character than the history of the other countries.[193] The ruling regime in Oman belongs to the Ibadi sect, a branch of Islam that cannot be characterised as Sunni or Shi'a, and upholds very different principles and costumes than the Saudi Wahhabism.[194] This thesis will argue that such national specificities are structurally relevant and strongly encourage a detailed analysis covering each of the six monarchies individually.

3.2 From a Gulf Union to the framentagion of the GCC.

The debate over the formation of a Gulf Union is a useful case to exemplify the perspective of this thesis on the GCC: arguably, the very fact that the idea of a full Union could be ventilated clarifies how strong is the interrelation between the GCC member states, but the fact that it never had concrete chances of materialising, highlights how these six monarchies would rather remain six distinct entities with their own agendas, priorities, policies. This could be a signal of the prevalence of state-centric considerations over unity, even in the face of threats, or of the lack of 'common threats' in their security perceptions. An indication validating the latter hypothesis can be drawn from the events after 2013.

Indeed, in March 2014, just a few months after the idea of the Gulf Union was finally rejected, the first substantial intra-GCC crisis begun, in a contradiction that is, once again, archetypical of the region's history, continuously oscillating between unity and division. In this instance, three GCC members, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, collectively withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar,

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[191] All the political, economic, sociological, historical differences among the GCC monarchies appear clearly in Christopher Davidson. *Power and politics in the Persian Gulf monarchies.* (London: Hurst), 2011, where all of these aspects are treated in separate chapters, each per every GCC state.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid.

accusing the country of promoting instability and insecurity in the GCC region. [195] The action was taken in response to an alleged breach on the part of Qatar of a comprehensive security agreement dated November 23, 2013, signed by the King of Saudi Arabia, the Emir of Qatar and witnessed by the Emir of Kuwait. [196] The document, known as the 'Riyadh Agreement', which will be thoroughly analysed later, is quintessentially a demand that Qatar refrains from any controversial policy perceived as negatively impacting the regional *status quo*. The missing GCC ambassadors returned to Doha eight months later, after Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani signed a second security agreement, known as the Supplementary Riyadh Agreement, on November 26, 2014, reiterating and reinforcing the points agreed upon in November 2013. [197] Both Agreements are available in full as Appendix A, Appendix B and Appendix C of this thesis. However, three years after the resolution of this diplomatic crisis, the GCC plunged into the most serious internal political crisis in its 36 years of existence.

It all started when, on May 24, Qatar News Agency (QNA) attributed controversial, conciliatory statements about Iran, Israel and Hamas to Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. [198] The same agency reported a decision of Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, to withdraw the country's ambassadors from Saudi, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE. Qatari officials quickly labelled these as fake news, and argued that QNA had been hacked. Qatar's Ministry of Interior would later report that the source of Qatar News Agency's hack had been traced back to the UAE, confirming hints leaked to the press by sources within the United States' intelligence

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[195] Ian Black, "Arab states withdraw ambassadors from Qatar in protest at 'interference'", *The Guardian*, 5 March 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/05/arab-states-qatar-withdraw-ambassadors-protest (accessed 20 July 2017)

[196] The two documents, the 2013 and 2014 Riyadh Agreement were leaked to the press in July 2017. The CNN, which originally obtained the documents, has provided both the original Arabic versions and English translations at http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/07/10/translation.of.agreementsupdated.pdf (accessed 21 July 2017). They are provided in full as Appendix A, Appendix B and Appendix C of this thesis.

[197] Ibid.

[198] "Qatari Emir: Doha has 'tensions' with the Donald Trump administration" *Al Arabiya English*, 24 May 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/05/24/Qatar-says-Iran-an-Islamic-power-its-ties-with-Israel-good-.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)

community.[199] Nonetheless, these comments sparked a string of strong responses from Saudi and Emirati media, with editorials and articles attacking every policy choice made in Doha, especially since 2011.[200]

In particular, regional media levelled the accusations against Qatar of funding terrorist groups - among which they include the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliates, openly supported by Qatar - and colluding with Iran and Iranian-backed militias to undermine the stability of the GCC. [201] Such an unprecedented media and information offensive, that went as far as attacking the legitimacy of Qatar's Emir, was the early signal of just how unique this crisis was with respect to previous ones. The very fact that it was played out in the public arena instead of intimate negotiations, signalled that the disputing parties were willing to cross what had been previously considered red lines. After weeks of such intense media offensive, on June 5th 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt announced that they had cut all relations with Qatar and extended a full closure against the country.[202] The quartet ejected Qatari diplomats, ordered Qatari citizens to leave their states within 14 days and halt all land, air and sea traffic with Qatar. In the weeks after this initial move, the crisis underwent a significant escalation when the quartet issued a list of 13 demands for Qatar to meet within 10 days in order to resolve the dispute.[203]

The demands, from several parts defined 'draconian', included: curbing all ties except economic ones with Iran; severing all ties with individuals, groups or

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[199] "Qatar presents proof of UAE role in QNA website hacking", *Gulf Times*, 20 July 2017, http://www.gulf-times.com/story/557315/Qatar-presents-proof-of-UAE-role-in-QNA-website-ha (accessed 8 January 2018); Karen DeYoung and Ellen Nakashima, "UAE orchestrated hacking of Qatari government sites, sparking regional upheaval, according to U.S. intelligence officials", *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2017.
[200] Diana Alghoul, "The continuing Gulf media offensive against Qatar", *The New Arab*, 5 June 2017, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2017/6/5/the-continuing-gulf-media-offensive-against-qatar, (accessed 20 July 2017)
[201] Patrick Wintour, "Gulf plunged into diplomatic crisis as countries cut ties with Qatar", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism (accessed 26 June 2017)
[202] "Iraq: Qatari 'ransom' money with us, not armed groups", *Al Jazeera*, 11 June 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/iraq-qatari-ransom-money-armed-groups-170611161949859.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)
[203] Patrick Wintour, "Qatar given 10 days to meet 13 sweeping demands by Saudi Arabia", *The Guardian*, 23 June 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/close-al-jazeera-saudi-arabia-issues-qatar-with-13-demands-to-end-blockade, (accessed 20 July 2017)

organisations that have been designated as terrorists by the quartet; shutting down Al Jazeera and news outlets that receive Qatar funds; immediately terminating any joint military cooperation with Turkey; disclosing and halting all contacts with political opposition figures in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain, handing them over to the country of origin; paying compensation for losses caused by Qatar's policies; consenting to audits for compliance; aligning with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically.[204] After a July meeting in Cairo, the quartet stated that such list of demands simply reiterated what already contained in documents that Qatar had signed in 2013 and 2014, namely the Riyadh Agreements.[205] While strongly calling for dialogue with its fellow GCC neighbours, Qatari leaders expressed firm rejection to the demands as soon as they were issued, arguing that those equated to ceding its sovereignty, and the crisis plunged into a diplomatic limbo.[206]

3.2.1 A different kind of crisis.

While, as treated earlier, the history of intra-GCC relations is ripe with instances of conflictual episodes, the 2017 chapter can be considered the gravest political crisis that the organization has ever endured. To begin with, the previous spat of 2014 saw – in terms of the gravest practical measure – only an eight-months-long withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini ambassadors from Doha. A similar measure had already been taken by Saudi Arabia in 2002, when the Saudi ambassador was recalled from Doha for almost six years.[207] At that time Saudi Arabia had allegedly acted in reaction to Al-Jazeera hosting Saudi dissidents critical of the Saudi ruling family and, predominantly, against the background of conflictual relations between the Saudi royals and Qatar's Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.[208] Emir Hamad had ascended to the throne in 1995, toppling his

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[204] Ibid.

[205] "Qatar should commit to six principles", *Bahrain News Agency*, 5 July 2017, http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/792679#.WV1XMXHPIcY (accessed 20 July 2017)

[206] "Qatar FM: Question mark over future of GCC after crisis", *Al Jazeera*, 6 June 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-fm-question-mark-future-gcc-crisis-170606001033685.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[207] "Saudi ambassador returns to Qatar after 5-yr gap", *Reuters*, 9 March 2008, https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-qatar/saudi-ambassador-returns-to-qatar-after-5-yr-gap-idUSL0925349720080309 (24 May 2019).

[208] For some context about this episode one could see Mehran Kamrava. *Qatar: Small state, big politics.* (New York: Cornell University Press), 2015.

father, who had enjoyed strong relations with Saudi Arabia, in a bloodless coup and would be challenged the following year by a counter coup attempt, allegedly sponsored and backed by Saudi Arabia.[209] The relations between Emir Hamad and Saudi Arabia never recovered fully. Leaked recordings of conversations between the Emir and Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim with former Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qaddafi, dating back to the first decade of the 2000s would seem to confirm what Saudi officials had lamented for long: a latent hostility of the Qatari government towards the legitimacy of the al-Saud family and the Kingdom in its present form.[210] In spite of such problematic precedent, however, the actual controversies remained confined to bilateral relations, and to the diplomatic sphere. The 2017 spat, instead, involved three more countries - United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt. Speculations transpired through the media that a military invasion of Qatar was also considered. [211] It also transcended into the cybersphere, the regional and international media and public relations, the social domain, economic relations *tout-court*, international politics and regional geopolitics. In particular, two major casualties of the 2017 intra-GCC crisis, have been the strong social and economic intra-GCC bonds.

Whereas previous disagreements among GCC leaders had been managed through closed-doors meetings, and generally carefully avoiding to involve the wider citizenry to preserve the domestic legitimacy of each country's ruler, this standoff largely involved what some even termed an 'information war'.[212] As mentioned, trans-regional media such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the same voices that the literature identified as enablers of the creation of a GCC 'imagined community', engaged since May 2017 in an extensive, vitriolic campaign for mutual damnation. Those became some of the major tools in the political dispute, that rapidly extended to the public opinions of the countries involved. Hostility was

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[209] See John Peterson. "Succession in the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council." *Washington Quarterly* 24.4 (2001): p.181.

[210] One of the leaked recordings is available at: "Former Qatari Emir conspired with Qaddafi against Saudi Arabia", *Al Arabiya*, 8 June 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/06/08/Former-Qatari-Emir-conspired-with-Gaddafi-against-Saudi-Arabia.html (accessed 30 January 2018)

[211] This remains a contested idea. While media closer to Qatar treat it as truth (see, for instance "Rex Tillerson stopped Saudi and UAE from 'attacking' Qatar", *Al Jazeera*, 1 August 2018), media closer to Saudi Arabia and the UAE dismiss the idea as a lie (see for instance, Abdulrahman al-Rashed, "Qatar and the Saudi 'invasion' that never was", *Arab News*, 20 September 2017.)

[212] Marc Jones, "Hacking, bots and information wars in the Qatar spat", in Marc Lynch, (ed), *The Qatar Crisis,* POMEPS Briefings #31, October 2017, pp. 8 -10.

amplified on social media, where citizens engaged directly against one another, endorsing the narratives of their governments, in a way that was deeply wounding the idea of a 'khaliji' community, increasingly replaced by a top-down nationalism.[213] In addition, the expulsion of Qatari citizens and the introduction of restrictions on cross-border movements, posed serious questions on the long-term impacts of the crisis on the GCC social fabric.[214]

On the other hand, the economic dimension of the crisis, i.e. the extension of a full-ranging economic closure against one fellow GCC state, doesn't have a precedent in the organization's history and might as well have effectively derailed the henceforth successful process of GCC economic integration.[215] The measures against Qatar were particularly dramatic given that the country depends heavily on the globalised liberal economic order to survive, importing over 80 percent of its food consumption and exporting its main resource, energy.[216] The substantial level of economic integration attained by the GCC thus became an enabling context for the offensive, magnifying the effects of the economic measures employed. This was, arguably, a significant red line crossed and quite an effective way to evidently show to Qatar's leadership that, in spite of its wealth and the political weight acquired through it, the Emirate remains a geographically small entity depending on its neighbours to thrive. In particular around 40 percent of Qatar's food imports used to enter the country through the land border with Saudi Arabia before the crisis and thus Doha's leadership had to, quickly, resort to contingency plans for avoiding a otherwise impingent food crisis.[217] Qatar established air bridges from the two nearest willing and able providers, Turkey and Iran, for obtaining essential goods.[218] In addition, Qatar had to re-route its energy exports, whose proceeds cover approximately 70 percent of government's revenues, through Iranian and Omani waters, in order

[213] Ibid.
[214] Courtney Freer. "Social effects of the Qatar crisis." *Indrastra Global* 10 (2017): p. 4.
[215] Steven Wright. "The Political Economy of the Gulf Divide." in Krieg (ed), *Divided Gulf*, pp. 145-159.
[216] "Qatar food imports hit after Arab nations cut ties - trade sources", *Reuters*, 5 June 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-food-idUSL8N1J23IC (accessed 20 July 2017)
[217] Adam Taylor, "Qatar could face a food crisis in spat with Arab neighbors", *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2017.
[218] Kristian Ulrichsen, "How Qatar Weathered the Gulf Crisis", *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2018.

to avoid crossing the quartet's territorial waters.[219] In fact, both Oman and Kuwait refused to join the anti-Qatar camp and strongly pledged their neutrality in the crisis, with Kuwait becoming the major mediator in resolution attempts.[220]

Finally, the 2017 crisis had substantial impacts on international and regional relations of the involved players and beyond. Due to the geostrategic, economic and financial significance of the GCC region, even major international powers were compelled to address the case. Indeed, already in the early weeks of the crisis, Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman al-Thani had been received by the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom, who declared the European neutrality and pledged their support of the Kuwait-led mediation initiative.[221] Similarly, other big powers such as Russia, China and India, simultaneously dependent on Saudi oil and Qatari gas, refrained from taking sides in the dispute and worked to guarantee the free flow of energy.[222] Finally the United States were heavily involved in the spat. The State Department and Defence Departments voiced support for de-escalation, to no avail. [223] Then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis were involved in mediation attempts and even appointed a Special Envoy for the crisis, General Anthony Zinni. US President Donald Trump instead supported the Saudi and Emirati position publicly and privately even before the crisis was triggered,

[219] Ulrichsen, "How Qatar Weathered the Gulf Crisis".
[220] Giorgio Cafiero and Theodore Karasik, "Kuwait, Oman, and the Qatar Crisis", *Middle East Institute*, 22 June 2017, https://www.mei.edu/publications/kuwait-oman-and-qatar-crisis (accessed 24 May 2019)
[221] Rory Miller and Khalid al-Mansouri, "Qatar's Foreign Policy Engagement with the European Union: Evolving Priorities of a Small State in The Contemporary Era." *La Política Exterior de Qatar* 2/5 (January-April 2018): pp 46-64; Máté Szalai. "The Crisis of the GCC and the Role of the European Union." *MENARA Future Notes*, No. 14, September 2018;
[222] Mohammed Sinan Siyech "India-Qatar Relations: Navigating Turbulent Seas", *Middle East Institute*, 9 April 2019, https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-qatar-relations-navigating-turbulent-seas (accessed 24 May 2019); Jonathan Fulton, "China's approach to the Gulf Dispute", *Asia Dialogue*, 3 May 2018, https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/05/03/chinas-approach-to-the-gulf-dispute/ (accessed 24 May 2019); Elena Melkumyan, "Emir of Qatar in Russia: Low Profile and Modest Outcome", *Valdai Club*, 30 March 2018, http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/emir-of-qatar-in-russia/ (accessed 24 May 2019).
[223] About the Secretary of Defense's statements see "Mattis affirms US-Qatar cooperation: Pentagon", *AFP News*, 7 July 2017; see also Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis at a Joint Press Availability, Dean Acheson Auditorium, Washington, DC, 21 June, 2017, available at https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/06/272103.htm (accessed 20 July 2017).

effectively enabling the hostilities against Qatar, a long-time, staunch US partner.[224]

At the regional level, actors in the wider MENA became, directly or indirectly, involved. Turkey, emerging as a vital ally in safeguarding the Emirate's food security, became also the strongest supporter of Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani politically, even deploying Turkish troops on Qatari soil to prevent any hypothetical military escalation of the crisis.[225] The decision highlighted, and cemented, the strong political bonds between Ankara and Doha, both supportive of political Islam, and institutionalised the agreements for security and defence cooperation signed between 2014 and 2016.[226] Doha also experienced a pragmatic rapprochement with Iran due to Tehran's willingness to support Qatari food security needs and to allow vessels coming from and going to Qatar to transit through its waters, providing key options to escape total isolation.[227] Already at the end of June, Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, took a public political stance backing Qatar and declaring the 'siege' against it 'unacceptable'.[228] In turn, in August of 2017, Qatar's Foreign Ministry restored full diplomatic relations with Iran after a 20-month hiatus that started in January 2016, when Qatar withdrew its ambassador in a show of solidarity towards Saudi Arabia, whose Iran-based diplomatic facilities had been ransacked.[229] Additionally, as a consequence of the rising role of the GCC countries in regional geopolitics since after 2011, which gained them significant stakes in major Middle Eastern dossiers, as well as strong relations with local parties, the Qatar crisis had a very long reach. For instance, the quartet received tepid support from several African and Middle Eastern countries including, most convincingly, from the Saudi protégé in Yemen, the

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[224] About the US' President Donald Trump's role in the crisis see: Michael Stephens. "Why key Arab countries have cut ties with Qatar — and what Trump had to do with it" in Lynch (ed), *The Qatar Crisis,* pp. 12 -13.

[225] Bülent Aras and Pınar Akpınar. "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Qatar Crisis." *IPC Policy Brief* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center), 2017.

[226] The texts of the agreements were leaked and can be read in Paul Cochrane, "Revealed: Secret details of Turkey's new military pact with Qatar", *Middle East Eye*, 27 January 2016, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-qatar-military-agreement-940298365 (accessed 20 July 2017)

[227] Ulrichsen, "How Qatar Weathered the Gulf Crisis".

[228] "Iran's Rouhani backs Qatar, rejects 'siege'", *Reuters*, 25 June 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-iran/irans-rouhani-backs-qatar-rejects-siege-idUSKBN19G0X2 (accessed 18 January 2018)

[229] "Qatar says its ambassador to return to Iran: foreign ministry", *Reuters*, 23 August 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-iran/qatar-says-its-ambassador-to-return-to-iran-foreign-ministry-idUSKCN1B32J6 (accessed 20 January 2018)

government of Abd Al Mansour al-Hadi, and the Emirati protégé in Libya, General Khalifa Haftar, head of the Eastern government in the embattled country.[230] Crucially, the involvement of regional parties was, as it will be argued later on, a sign of how the very issues at stake in the crisis are strictly related to the tectonic shifts that have taken place in the entire MENA region after 2011.

3.3 The Riyadh Agreements and the issues at stake.

As anticipated, in June 2017 the quartet accused Qatar of funding terrorist groups and colluding with Iran and Iranian-backed militias to undermine the stability of the GCC. [231] In the definition of terrorist groups, the quartet and their state media included not only jihadist militias, but also all groups affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed or designated as a terrorist organization by the quartet countries between 2013 and 2014.[232] The second major accusation, that of collusion between Qatar and Iranian-backed militias, was initially related by the *Financial Times* to a ransom deal paid by Qatar to free 26 members of a Qatari falconry party kidnapped in southern Iraq by an Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militia known as Kata'eb Hezbollah in April 2017.[233] Despite statements by Iraq's Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi that the sum was received by the Iraqi government, and used in the rescue operations, regional government officials insisted that around $700m was paid both to Iranian figures and Shi'a militias, and that was a manifestation of Qatar's active collusion with forces aiming at the destabilization of the GCC monarchies.[234] The quartet later formalised their complains in a list of aforementioned demands which were described as points from 2013 and 2014 Riyadh Agreements (Appendix A, Appendix B, Appendix C), already signed by Qatar.[235] The reference to such agreements was arguably not a rhetorical device

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[230] See Lynch (ed), *The Qatar Crisis*.

[231] Patrick Wintour, "Gulf plunged into diplomatic crisis as countries cut ties with Qatar"

[232] Stig Jarle Hansen, "O Brotherhood, What Art Thou?", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-03-24/o-brotherhood-what-art-thou (accessed 20 July 2017)

[233] Erika Solomon, "The $1bn hostage deal that enraged Qatar's Gulf rivals", *Financial Times*, 5 June 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43?mhq5j=e1, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[234] "Iraq: Qatari 'ransom' money with us, not armed groups", *Al Jazeera*, 11 June 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/iraq-qatari-ransom-money-armed-groups-170611161949859.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[235] "Qatar should commit to six principles", *Bahrain News Agency*.

in a war of words but, rather, a reference to what can be considered a documentary cornerstone of contemporary intra-GCC political relations and an unmatched written window into the GCC's divergent security perceptions.

The documents' gravity is quickly evident in their language: the words most often, almost obsessively, reiterated in the few pages are 'security' and 'stability'. In what may be described as an uncommon situation, given the GCC leaders reluctance to transparency in their security affairs, the documents - that were supposed to remain secret - also define, quite explicitly, what are perceived to be security threats by the signatories, in 2013 as in 2017. Indeed, the link of continuity between the events of 2014 and of 2017 is hardly disputable: not only did the previous spat involve the same actors of the 2017 crisis, the similarity and connection between the 2017 list of demands and the Riyadh Agreements is also quite striking.

The 2013 Agreement, signed by the Saudi King and the Qatari Emir and witnessed by Kuwait's leader, laid out three commitments. The first one is to avoid 'interference in the internal affairs of the GCC states, whether directly or indirectly, [including] not to give asylum/refuge or give nationality to any citizen of the Council states that has an activity opposing his country's regimes, and no support for antagonistic media'.[236] The point is clearly about preserving political security, i.e. regime stability, that can, supposedly, be endangered from outside actors (in this case, Qatar) supporting dissidents. Point two and three specifically mention avoiding to support the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as opposition groups in Yemen 'that could pose a threat to neighbouring countries', i.e. Saudi Arabia, the proponent of such agreement.[237] The idea, expressed in the second point, that Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups could 'threaten the security and stability of the Council states through direct security work or through political influence',[238] is a reference to the concept that in this thesis is termed as intermestic threats. Additionally, the relevance of these points becomes self-explanatory if taken in the context of the region-wide factional struggle for power, that, since 2011, saw

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[236] Cfr. Appendix A
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.

the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood and other non-state actors, including in Yemen.[239]

The following document, the 2014 Supplementary Agreement, is even more specific.[240] The list of signatories is expanded, as it includes: King Abdullah Bin Abdel Aziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, King Hamad Bin Eissa al-Khalifa of Bahrain, Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashed al-Maktom, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, Mohamed Bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani of Qatar. Tellingly, no Omani official signed the agreement, and similarly to what happened in 2017, Oman steered clear from the dispute altogether. The Emir of Kuwait did sign it, but was later identified as a neutral mediator in the dispute rather than an active signatory.[241] The document's incipit reiterated its direct connection to the deal signed one year earlier. It is explicitly divided into matters of domestic and foreign policy and its underlying idea is that in vulnerable times, Qatar has provided financial, logistic and political support (or simply airtime) to individuals or organizations opposing the security and stability of the GCC. The proscription to provide tangible or intangible support, including financial backing, political protection or media exposure, to any 'person or media apparatus that harbours harmful inclinations to any Gulf Cooperation Council state' is repeated multiple times and in multiple variations.[242] The fact that this point appears both in the domestic and foreign affairs sections and that there is a specific call to 'preventing external groups, parties and organizations that target the GCC from finding a place inside GCC countries'[243], speak again of threats perceived as intermestic. Catalogued under the foreign policy matters is the call to avoid financial, media or political backing to the Muslim Brotherhood as well as groups in Syria, Yemen and 'any of the sites of sedition'.[244]   Except for the Muslim Brotherhood, no other regional group is explicitly defined as hostile in this document, but will be in the context of the 2017 crisis. These points highlights, one again, the tight interrelation of the regional

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[239] Adam Baron, "Qatar's Dispute with Neighbors Reverberates in Yemen" *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 19 July 2017, http://www.agsiw.org/qatars-dispute-with-neighbors-reverberates-in-yemen/ (accessed 21 July 2017)
[240] Cfr. Appendix B and Appendix C
[241] Abdulhadi Alajmi. "The Gulf Crisis: An Insight Into Kuwait's Mediation Efforts." *International Relations* 6.10 (2018): pp. 537-548.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.

and domestic levels of security in the contemporary security calculus of the signatories. Crucially, a robust emphasis is put in the text on the necessity to contributing to the stability and security of Egypt, one of the major dossier of intra-GCC competition, as the most populous and politically-relevant MENA country. In fact while Qatar had supported the 2011 Egyptian uprisings and the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammad Morsi elected in 2012, both financially and through media coverage at Al Jazeera, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had been at the forefront of supporting financially, logistically and politically a military coup against the Morsi government and the resulting military regime under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.[245]

3.3.1 Tentative appeasement.

The first Riyadh Agreement was signed in 2013, after Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who had ruled Qatar since 1995, and had been the main architect of Doha's policy in support of Islamist groups in the region, abdicated in favour of his thirty-three-years old son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Due to its timing, the move seemed, also, an exploitation of the opportunity to pressure a young Emir into taking the distances from his father's hyper-active policies. Indeed, at a comprehensive read, the agreement's content can be summarised with the demand that Qatar aligned completely with the priorities and perspectives of the other GCC regimes, both at the level of domestic politics than at regional politics. For instance, it included also several, detailed, implementation and monitoring mechanisms, as well as the idea of retaliation in case of failure to honour the deals.

As part of the deal, in 2014 Qatar tried to establish some dialogue with the anti-Islamist military regime of al-Sisi in Egypt and ejected a number of individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood from Doha, including seven senior figures.[246] Among them, there was the Brotherhood's acting leader, Mahmoud

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[245] See Kristian Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2014.

[246] Ian Black, "Qatar-Gulf deal forces expulsion of Muslim Brotherhood leaders", *The Guardian*, 16 September 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/16/qatar-orders-expulsion-exiled-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-leaders (accessed 21 July 2017).

Hussein and Amr Darrag, the Brotherhoods's foreign relations officer, all of them relocating to Turkey. Qatar also agreed to soften the tone of Al Jazeera in all reports that could damage the GCC regimes' interests and shut down completely Al Jazeera's affiliate in Egypt, Mubasher Misr.[247] In addition to that, since 2014, Emir Tamim doubled down on his efforts to align his country's foreign policy with that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, chiefly in Syria and Yemen. In Syria, Qatar swayed his support most substantially to Saudi-backed opposition factions.[248] In Yemen, Doha joined the Saudi-led operations launched in March 2015 against the rebel force known as Houthis, sympathetic to Iran.[249] Qatar also recalled its Ambassador from Tehran, in solidarity with Saudi Arabia, that cut ties with Iran following attacks on Saudi missions by Iranians protesting the execution by Riyadh's government of the Saudi Shi'a cleric and opposition leader Nimr al-Nimr.[250]

However, as evidenced by the subsequent, and graver, crisis erupted in 2017, these policy adjustments were considered inadequate displays of commitment towards Saudi and Emirati-led GCC unity. For example, crucially, Qatar never joined Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in designating the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization or cut relations with its members in the region. Additionally, Doha continued to host and give a platform to prominent Brotherhood figures such as the ideologue of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al-Qaradawi. As Qatar's Foreign Minister often declared, there would be no compelling reason to undertake drastic, harsh measures against the Brotherhood, as the organization represents no threat to Qatar's security.[251] This simple statement, in open contrast with the perspectives of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, arguably exposes the crux of the issue in the GCC discord: the existence of divergent security perceptions within the bloc. This fundamental strategic divergence is, arguably, the reason why practical and pragmatic measures taken by Qatar in the period

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[247] "Al-Jazeera suspends Egyptian channel Mubasher Misr", *BBC*, 23 December 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-30585551, (accessed 21 July 2017)
[248] Ulrichsen, "Qatar and the Arab Spring" p. 6
[249] Baron, "Qatar's Dispute with Neighbors Reverberates in Yemen"
[250] "Qatar recalls envoy to Iran after attacks on Saudi missions: State News", *Reuters*, 6 January 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iran-qatar-idUSKBN0UK23Z20160106 (accessed 21 July 2017)
[251] Mohammed Al-Sulaimi, ""We don't, won't and didn't support the Muslim Brotherhood," Qatar FM tells Arab News", *Arab News*, 17 May 2017, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1100781/middle-east (accessed 21 July 2017)

2014-2017 couldn't prevent the emergence of a fresh intra-GCC crisis that, as clarified by the demands issued against Doha, focused around fully aligning with the other GCC countries. Among other - more contingent - points, Doha is essentially asked - again - to halt all contacts and deny any kind or assistance, including media exposure, to actors in opposition to the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain, designated as terrorists by the quartet. The main difference, this time, is that the quartet would issue a specific list of individuals and organizations identified as sources of 'threats, subversion, and the spread of instability'.[252] This, so-called, blacklist was first released in June 2017 and then integrated in July and November of the same year with two more lists, and is officially endorsed by all the members of the quartet: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt.

3.3.2 The 2017 blacklists

Analysing the content of the blacklists released in 2017 by the quartet, available in this thesis as Appendix D, provides with some useful characteristics to profiling the specific type of individuals and organizations that are, supposedly, considered hostile by three of the six GCC governments. Undoubtedly, one could postulate that such lists can be heavily politicised and the threatening capacity of the blacklisted entities or individuals be inflated for an aggressive, rather than defensive, political hidden agenda of hyper-securitization. However, arguably, a number of factors still make such lists relevant research material. Firstly, given that this thesis defines security as, primarily, political stability - i.e. the ability of regimes to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile - the politicisation of a given issue only reinforces its relevance to this study. Secondarily, it is worth reminding that the object of this study are security perceptions and that those are not constrained by objectivity, but rather represent the outcome of the process of apprehending and interpreting an issue, in which the aggressive and defensive

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[252] The official joint statement can be read at "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain issue statement on lists of designated terrorist organisations, individuals linked with Qatar", United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation website, 6 September 2017,
https://www.mofa.gov.ae/EN/MediaCenter/News/Pages/09-06-2017-UAE-Qatar.aspx
(accessed 30 January 2018).

intents can be easily mixed up. Thirdly, the consistency with which the blacklisted names fit into the framework drawn through the Riyadh Agreements, the list of demands released in 2017 and some of the leaderships' discourse as well as foreign policy choices, encourages to consider them as worthy of thorough analysis. Nonetheless, while the aforementioned elements will be instrumental in defining the perimeter of this study, their conceptualization in the security calculus of each of the GCC governments will undergo an in-depth scrutiny in the following chapters of this thesis, with inputs from the researcher's fieldwork. Therefore, at this stage, our priority is merely to accept those elements' validity to narrow down our case studies. With this in mind, attempting to look at the three lists released in 2017 comprehensively, three categories of individuals and organizations emerge.[253]

The first, large, category is that of political Islamists, namely the Muslim Brotherhood and organizations gravitating around its ideology. The quartet stated several times that the Muslim Brotherhood had to be considered a terrorist group.[254] While Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have been more ambiguous in their treatment of the Brotherhood, the United Arab Emirates government, since 2011, jailed dozens of Brotherhood activists and launched an assertive region-wide anti-Islamist policy.[255] Alongside the international central organization, the quartet singled out affiliated entities such as the Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars and the International Islamic Council for Da'wah and Relief, accused of 'promoting terrorism' with the backing of Qatar's and Turkey's governments.[256] Also smaller associated entities such as the Al Karama Organization, the Foundation Sheikh Thani Ibn Abdullah for Humanitarian Services, Corboda Foundation in the United Kingdom, and the Al Islah Association, were targeted. As with regards to individuals, among those on the

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[253] The three lists are available at: "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain issue statement on lists of designated terrorist organisations, individuals linked with Qatar", 9 June 2017; "UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain declare details of new terror designations", 26 July 2017; "Anti-terror quartet adds two entities, 11 individuals to terrorism lists", 23 November 2017, Press Releases, United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation's website, (accessed 24 May 2019). A copy of the three lists is also available in this thesis as Appendix D
[254] "Arab states blacklist Islamist groups, individuals in Qatar boycott", *Reuters*, 22 November 2017, ttps://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-security/arab-states-blacklist-islamist-groups-individuals-in-qatar-boycott
[255] Roberts, "Mosque and State".
[256] Cfr. Appendix D

blacklists is a member of the board of trustees of the Al Karama and head of Relief International Development of the Qatari Red Crescent, Khaled Nazem Diab. A United States' citizen of Syrian origin, and a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, he stands accused by the quartet, the United States and the United Nations of funding armed militias in Syria, Yemen, Mauritania, Djibouti and Iraq.[257] Additionally, dozens of prominent Brotherhood leaders from Egypt, the birthplace of the organization, appeared in the lists, including the spiritual leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the organizations' acting general leader, Alsayed Mahmoud Ezzat Ibrahim Eissa, and others such as Alaa Ali al-Samahi, Qadri Mohamed Fahmy Mahmoud Sheikh and Mohammed Jamal Ahmed Hishmat Abdul Hamid, key founder of Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party, the political office of the Brotherhood, and member of the party's high committee. Those Egyptian nationals were, generally speaking, accused of inciting riots in Egypt during and after the 2011 revolution as well as violently opposing the al-Sisi regime. Similarly, the Libyan entities in the lists include Islamist figures and militias who had been key opponents of the anti-Islamist government of General Khalifa Haftar, based in the east of the country and supported by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. For instance, the lists include the Benghazi Defence Brigades and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council. Militia leaders were also singled out, such as Ismail Mohammed Sallabi of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council and Abdul Hakim Belhadj, former leader of al-Qa'ida's Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the Tripoli Military Council and the al Watan party. Ali Mohammed Salabi, Ismail's brother, a Qatar-based preacher close to the Brotherhood, was also blacklisted alongside another preacher with ties to Yusuf al-Qaradawi and several Qatari foundations, Salem Jaber Omar Ali Sultan Fathallah Jaber, accused of provoking armed militias to launch attacks from Tahrir Square in Benghazi. Finally, the quartet targeted also the former Mayor of Tripoli, Mahdi al-Harati, who fought in the 2011 revolution against Mu'ammar Qaddafi as part of Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade and then in Syria as part of jihadist group Liwa al-Ummah. Several Libyan media – al Saraya Media Center Boshra News Agency, Nabaa TV, The Tanasuh Foundation for Dawa, Culture, and Media in Libya - accused of spreading propaganda for the blacklisted organization, were also added to the lists. The

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[257] "Who is the 'Fox of Qatar', one of the most dangerous men wanted for terror", *Al Arabiya*, 23 November 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/11/23/Who-is-the-Fox-of-Qatar-one-of-the-most-dangerous-men-wanted-for-terror.html (accessed 24 May 2019)

overall accusation for the Libyans blacklisted was that they had received substantial financial support from the Qatari authorities to advance the Islamist agenda in Libya.

A second category in the blacklists was that of individuals and organizations related to jihadist groups. Many individuals or entities in the lists were accused of financing, aiding or providing material support to al-Qa'ida and its associated organisations and networks, especially Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra, Yemen's al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Egypt's al Gama'a al Islamiyya. In this category, most of the individuals are of Qatari nationality, including members of the royal family, plus a group of Kuwaiti, Yemeni, Egyptian and Jordanian nationals. Many of the organizations are Qatari-funded charities, such as Qatar Charity and Eid Charity. One of the prominent Kuwaiti names was that of Hamid Hamad al-Ali, who allegedly attempted to mediate a reconciliation between the leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh, and has travelled to Syria several times to meet with Jabhat al-Nusra's leader Abu Mohammed al Jawlani and Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[258] Among those on the blacklist is also Moyasar Ali Musa Abdullah al-Jubouri, dubbed Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a former officer in the Iraqi Army who joined Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria as the Grand Mufti and Emir of eastern area, and has alleged connections to Daesh in Iraq.[259] Blacklisted by the United Nations for his association with al-Qa'ida, the quartet denounced that he uses a Qatari passport in his travels.[260] Finally, a noteworthy group in this category is that related to Yemen's AQAP, engaged in fighting against the UAE military in the south of the country. The quartet added to the lists three Yemeni charities, Al Balagh Charitable Foundation, Al Ihsan Charitable Society, Rahma Charitable Organization, accused of carrying on projects in AQAP-occupied Hadramout Province, with funds from Qatari organizations such as the Eid Charity and Qatar Charity.[261] In the lists also appear individuals such as Abdullah

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[258] "Hamid al-Ali: Nusra Front's Life Line", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 26 July 2017, https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/abdullah-al-haydah/features/hamid-al-ali-nusra-fronts-life-line (accessed 24 May 2019)

[259] "Moyasar Ali Musa Abdullah al Jubouri", United Nations Security Council's Sanctions List, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/maysar-ali-musa-abdallah-al-juburi (accessed 24 May 2019)

[260] Cfr. Appendix D

[261] Ibid.

al-Yazidi, Ahmed Ali Ahmed Baraoud and Mohammed Bakr al-Dabaa, all members of the Hadhrami Domestic Council in AQAP-occupied Mukalla.

Finally, the third categories of the blacklists is that of Shi'a Islamists, i.e. militias allegedly backed by Iran, most prominently represented by Hezbollah, designated as a terrorist organization by the GCC in March 2016.[262] In this category feature most prominently individuals and militias associated with the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain. Among them, Bahraini national Hassan Ali Mohammed Juma Sultan, a Shi'a cleric who obtained his religious studies in Iran and has been a leader of the Islamic Dawa Party, as well as Bahrain's al-Wefaq, and was allegedly affiliated in several activities with the Lebanese Hezbollah.[263] He was featured in an audio recording of a phone conversation with Hamad bin Khalifah al-Attiyah, special advisor to Qatar's Emir, seemingly aimed at coordinating Qatar's Bahrain policy and the opposition's stances.[264] Also on the list is Mohammed Suleiman Haidar Mohammed al-Haidar, a Qatari businessman accused of financing several armed groups active in Bahrain in opposition to the ruling family. Many of the Shi'a groups involved in armed struggle against the Bahraini royals, such as the Saraya Al Ashtar, the February 14 Youth Coalition, the Saraya Al Muqawama (or Resistance Brigades), Hezbollah al-Bahraini, Saraya Al Mukhtar, Harakat Ahrar Bahrain, are indeed blacklisted. Those are groups radicalised after the failure of the 2011 turmoil in Bahrain, that the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE - and, to some extent, of the United States - accuse of receiving funding, support and training for their violent actions from Iran.[265]

Overall, attempting to look at the three lists and demands released thorough 2017 comprehensively, and keeping in mind the content of the Riyadh Agreements, the blacklisted individuals and entities can be, broadly, divided into three

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[262] David Pollock. "Hezbollah Labelled Terrorist by GCC States" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2016.
[263] Ibid.
[264] The original recording is available at "'Emir' from Qatar heard conspiring against Bahrain", *Al Arabiya*, 17 June 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/06/17/Who-is-this-Emir-from-Qatar-heard-conspiring-against-Bahrain-.html (accessed 21 January 2018)
[265] The United States Department of State released a statement designating the Saraya al Ashtar a terrorist organization funded and coordinated by Iran at "State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi" Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, 17 March 2017.

categories: Sunni politicised Islamists, Shi'a groups perceived as Iranian proxies and jihadist organizations. Those will be the three case studies of this thesis. Fundamentally what already emerges is that the 2011 wave of regional instability, reaching the GCC, created a context of heightened security perceptions and cemented the overlap between the regional and domestic levels in the security calculus of the leaders. The political emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in North Africa after 2012, the establishment of a jihadist statelet in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and the expansion of Iran's geopolitical reach in the region, were all treated, strategically, as contingent issues, in this context of heightened securitization and, even, considered as consequentially related to the instability caused by the 2011 protests wave.

The chosen timeframe for analysis, from 2011 to 2017, is therefore the most appropriate to examine how the security perceptions vary when exogenous and endogenous issues interact and overlap against the background of hyper-securitization. However, arguably, many questions remain about the markedly different perspectives of each GCC country, which will be explored in-depth in the following six empirical chapters, one per each GCC country. The order of the chapters has been established by the researcher for clarity: first Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, then Qatar and, finally, Kuwait and Oman. What will be argued is that each GCC country perceived the 2011 protests wave differently as their own experience with them were, *per se*, profoundly different, an element that is often overlooked. Such fundamental mismatches are identified by this thesis as the contemporary roots of the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises. The first paragraph of each empirical chapter will be thus dedicated to analysing the impact of the Arab Spring on the leadership's security perceptions. The three following paragraphs will explore the three case studies selected by the researcher: Iran-aligned Shi'a proxies, the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated Islamist groups, and jihadist organizations, in this order. Hence it will be possible to appreciate the nuances of security perceptions of those actors, highlighting how and why some issues have been securitised into threats and others into risks, and which kind of vulnerabilities might have been leveraged in both cases. The last paragraph will instead be dedicated to highlighting which issue has been perceived as a priority threat in each country in the period 2011-2017, why, and how it relates to those at the centre of the intra-GCC crises.

4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: BAHRAIN.

Under Riyadh's guidance, Bahrain quickly joined Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt against Qatar in both intra-GCC crises. However, Bahrain's motives arguably need further examination. On one hand, Bahrain and Qatar have a conflictual shared past. Bahrain's ruling family, the al-Khalifa, ruled over large parts of present-day Qatar until they were ousted by the al-Thani tribe, with the support of Britain, in the nineteenth century.[266] The Bahraini-Qatari rivalry was also at the core of both states' decision not to join the proposed Federation of Arab Emirates as members, alongside the Trucial States, or present-day UAE.[267] Territorial disputes, including regarding control over the Hawar islands, marred the bilateral relations, especially until they were settled by the International Court of Justice in 2001.[268] In 1996, Qatar accused Bahrain of participating in a counter-coup against Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, aimed at restoring the rule of his pro-Saudi father.[269] However, Qatar-Bahrain relations had actually improved in the 2000s, with a number of ambitious joint ventures, including a 'friendship bridge' linking the two countries, much praised by Bahraini officials as an opportunity to overcome critical socio-economic pressures, by involving Bahrain in Qatar's rapid economic growth.[270] A US diplomatic cable from 2005, leaked by Wikileaks, goes: 'Although neither the gas pipeline nor the causeway to Qatar have entered the implementation stage, the King maintained that relations with Qatar are now excellent. He joked that with the completion of the causeway, Bahrain would receive Qatar's money and Qatar would get Bahrain's ideas (on political reform).'[271] On the other hand, the events of 2011 represented a

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[266] Zahlan. *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, p. 11
[267] Ibid.
[268] Krista E. Wiegand, "Bahrain, Qatar, and the Hawar Islands: Resolution of a Gulf Territorial Dispute," *Middle East Journal* 66:1 (2012), p. 94.
[269] "Life Sentences for Qatari Coup Plotters," *BBC News*, 29 February 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/660887.stm, (accessed 26 November 2018)
[270] Steven Wright. "Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain." Occasional Paper No. 3. Center for International References and Regional Studies. Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, 2010, p. 13.
[271] "US embassy cables: King of Bahrain discusses Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel/Palestine", *The Guardian*, 16 February 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/07/bahrain-jordan?cat=world&type=article (accessed 23 November 2018).

formidable watershed for the Bahraini leadership as, lamenting a predatory interference from Iran, Manama closed ranks with Saudi Arabia, in a mechanism generating an almost symbiotic relationship.[272] Much of Bahrain's budget, increasingly under strain due to political instability, became dependent on revenues from the Saudi ARAMCO-controlled Abu Saʿfah oil field, and on additional financial backing from both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.[273] After 2011, Bahrain has subscribed to all foreign policy initiatives promoted by Saudi Arabia - from the creation of a Gulf Union to the Yemen war - and has consistently toed the Saudi line in regional politics.[274] Bahrain's smallness, especially against the magnitude of the emerging dangers, was a crucial factor in this development.

Indeed, when addressing threat and security perceptions in Bahrain a key element to acknowledge upfront is that the archipelago Kingdom – which, according to a 2010 census, has approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, less than half of whom are Bahraini nationals – is the smallest GCC state.[275] Its size and geostrategic location have historically made Bahrain a consumer rather than a producer of security and larger neighbours or international players have traditionally competed to extend their influence on the country's decision-making, with profound impacts.[276] A second element to underline is that Bahrain has a minority rule system, whereby members of a minority socio-political group, the Sunni royal family, rule over a different socio-political majority, Shi'a Bahrainis, through an authoritarian approach.[277] This has pushed the regime to deploy a

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[272] Mehran Kamrava. *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf*. (New York: Cornell University Press), 2018, pp. 103-106

[273] Eckart Woertz, "Bahrain's Economy: Oil Prices, Economic Diversification, Saudi Support, and Political Uncertainties" *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, 2 October 2018; Glen Carey and Matthew Martin, "In Saudi Shadow, One Troubled Gulf State Seeks an Investor Reset" *Bloomberg*, 26 March 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-26/in-saudi-shadow-one-troubled-gulf-state-seeks-an-investor-reset (accessed 24 November 2018).

[274] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters*.

[275] Quoted in Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadhi, Philippe Kirsch, Mahnoush H. Arsanjani, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, Manama, 23 November 2011, p. 9.

[276] Adam Hanieh. "Bahrain." in Paul Amar and Vijay Prashod (eds.) *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East,* University of Minnesota, 2013, pp. 63 – 88.

[277] A definition of a minority rule is offered in: Oded Haklai, "A minority rule over a hostile majority: The case of Syria", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 6:3 (2000): pp. 19-50. While Bahrain keeps data on its sectarian demographics a closely guarded secret, academic studies largely agree that Bahraini Shi'a represent between 55 and 60 percent of the population. See for instance Justin Gengler, "Segregation and Sectarianism: Geography, Economic Distribution, and Sectarian Resilience in Bahrain,"

number of tactics, including targeted coercion and patronage, aimed at preserving regime security by preventing cross-societal opposition, that the literature has described as a divide-and-rule approach.[278] By pitting socio-political communities against one another, the regime gains strategic space to navigate and manage forces it considers threatening to its stability.

Against this backdrop, in fact, I will argue that when focusing on the issues at the centre of the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises – namely Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi organizations – leadership perceptions in Bahrain factor in primarily the country's own vulnerabilities at the socio-economic and socio-political level. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack such perceptions beyond the official narrative, and draw conclusions on their roots as well as on the fundamental priorities in the security calculus of Bahrain. In order to do so, it will be necessary to analyse the narratives and discourses and benchmark them against data and factual information about the individual issues as well as the vulnerabilities of the archipelago Kingdom. The starting point would be, as in the other cases, a closer look at the events of 2011 and their impacts, from the viewpoint of Manama.

4.1 Bahrain and the Arab Spring.

The protests taking place on the long wave of the Arab Spring in Bahrain were qualitatively and quantitatively different from those happening in other GCC countries. Those protests inscribed themselves in a historical context of similarly significant events, gathered substantially more participation in relative terms and were more politicised than in any other GCC country.[279]

Already in the first major day of protests on February 14, 2011 - dubbed Day of Rage and organised on Facebook by a group calling itself "The Youth of the February 14th Revolution" - dozens of marches took place in different locations

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in *Countering Sectarianism in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation), 2019, p. 41.
[278] The divide-and-rule strategy has been traced back to the evry inception of the state: Omar Hesham AlShehabi. "Contested modernity: divided rule and the birth of sectarianism, nationalism, and absolutism in Bahrain." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44.3 (2017): pp. 333-355.
[279] Matthiesen. *Sectarian Gulf*.

across the country, gathering a total of approximately six thousand people.[280] These demonstrations were patrolled by the police who, when confrontation erupted, reacted and killed the first protester.[281] Demonstrations and confrontations with the security forces took place every following day of the month, as demonstrators converged on the interior of a major traffic circle, the Pearl Roundabout, and set camp there.[282] On the night between February 17 and February 18, approximately 100 riot police were sent in a raid on the Roundabout and four more demonstrators were killed.[283] Following that crackdown - in part at the reported urging of the United States, calling for restraint - the government pulled security forces back from the Roundabout, as even larger demonstrations, at times reportedly gathering up to 100.000 people, continued to be held almost on a daily basis.[284] A national strike called in solidarity with protesters on February 20 was joined by almost 80 percent of Bahraini citizens.[285] In March protests escalated and extended to areas predominantly inhabited by Sunni Bahrainis and to locations within reach of the Royal Palace.[286] Several counter-protests, populated mostly by Sunni loyalists, took place stressing the need to defend the regime and, at times, clashed with Shi'a protesters.[287] In the meantime part of the demonstrators had become openly anti-monarchical, as thousands chanted 'Down with the King'.[288] On March 13, after the Secretary General of al-Wefaq, the main Shi'a opposition party, Sheikh Ali Salman, declared at a press conference that the land on which the Bahrain Financial Harbour was built had been sold to Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa for one Bahraini Dinar, protesters blockaded the financial district of Manama.[289] That same day, on 13 March 2011, the Bahraini King, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, put in a request for assistance from the GCC Peninsula Shield Forces. The following day about 1200

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[280] Stephen Zunes. "Bahrain's arrested revolution." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35.2 (2013), p. 154
[281] Ibid.
[282] Ibid.
[283] "Bahrain protests: Police break up Pearl Square crowd", *BBC News*, 18 February 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12490286 (accessed 23 November 2018)
[284] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, Manama, 23 November 2011.
[285] Ibid., p. 79
[286] Ibid., p. 116
[287] Ibid., p. 122
[288] Zunes, "Bahrain's arrested revolution.", p.156.
[289] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, p. 124

units from the Saudi Arabia Royal Guard and 800 police officers from the United Arab Emirates entered Manama under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Forces, deployed to guard some of the country's critical infrastructures, while Bahraini forces cracked down on the protests. [290] A handful of military advisors arrived from Oman and Qatar and naval formations from Kuwait executed reconnaissance and patrolling missions off the Bahraini coast.[291] The King declared a three-months state of emergency, authorising law enforcement agencies to adopt a more forceful approach towards protesters, as they were cleared from Pearl Roundabout, with approximately three thousand people arrested and 46 people, from both the opposition and the security forces, killed.[292] Among the arrested were Hassan Mushaimaa of the hard-line al-Haq group, a London-based dissident who had openly called for regime change, and Ibrahim Sharif of the liberal al-Wa'ad party, a Sunni politician advocating for cross-sectarian cooperation against the regime.[293] Hassan Mushaimaa's Haq, together with a fringe Shi'a movement known as Wafa'a and the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement, had announced on the 7th of March 2011, from the Pearl Roundabout, the establishment of the "Coalition for the Republic" declaring their aim to topple the monarchy in Bahrain and establish a republic.[294] Interestingly, initially, none of the al-Wefaq leaders, including its leader Sheikh Ali Salman, were arrested, and the society had refrained from advocating for the toppling of the ruling family. [295] On March 18, the Pearl Monument was demolished, giving symbolic closure to the first wave of the Bahraini Arab Spring.

This first phase of the Bahraini Spring was characterised by two main elements. The first was the attempt to work out a political solution through dialogue between the leadership and parliamentary groups, and the second was the internationalization of the crisis via the GCC intervention and allegations on the protesters' complicity with Iran.

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[290] Laurence Louër. "Sectarianism and coup-proofing strategies in Bahrain." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36.2 (2013): pp. 245-260.

[291] Guzansky. "Defence cooperation in the Arabian Gulf", pp. 640-654.

[292] Bassiouni, et al, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*.

[293] "Bahrain arrests key opposition leaders" *Arab News*, 18 March 2011 https://web.archive.org/web/20120307000356/http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article320723.ece, (accessed 23 November 2018)

[294] Hanieh. "Bahrain.", p. 80

[295] These remarks were part of a speech delivered by a former MP of al-Wefaq party in a closed-door roundtable held in London, 30 November 2018.

During the first phase of the Bahraini Spring, political representatives attempted to channel the people's demands to the government. Already on February 16, 2011 political figures such as the leader of the al-Wafa'a opposition movement, Abdulwahab Hussein, and the Secretary-General of al-Wefaq Sheikh Ali Salman, visited the Peal Roundabout where protesters had gathered. The speech given by the King that same day, reaffirming the right of Bahrainis to exercise their freedom of expression, had raised hopes for a political solution to address the protesters' grievances.[296] By that point, the slogans raised during these demonstrations included: calls for disbanding the nominated Consultative Council; drafting a new constitution giving legislative powers to elected parliamentarians; giving executive powers to an elected Prime Minister; releasing political prisoners and human rights activists.[297] Effectively, while there were socio-economic demands, such as providing more jobs and economic opportunities, protesters were calling for the creation of a new power-sharing mechanism to the detriment of the control of the al-Khalifa royal family, and of the privileged access of Sunni Bahrainis to political and economic power in the country. A few individuals had encouraged more radical demands: on February 18, in a sermon broadcasted on the Ahl Albayt television channel, the Bahraini Shi'a cleric exiled in Iraq Sheikh Hadi Almadrassi, advocated for Bahrainis to remove 'a corrupt, oppressive and backward ruling family that had been forcefully ruling Bahrain'.[298]

On the other front, Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa invited those protesters' representatives considered more moderate to formal dialogue. The King pardoned 308 Bahrainis and excluded the Minister of Health, the Minister for Housing, the Minister for Electricity and Water Affairs, and the Minister for the Council of Ministers' Affairs, all marred by corruption allegations, from the cabinet.[299] The latter minister, Sheikh Ahmed al-Khalifa, had come under particularly strong criticism since he had been identified, in the so-called

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[296] "Popular protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): the Bahrain Revolt", Middle East/North Africa Report N°105, International Crisis Group, 6 April 2011, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/bahrain/popular-protests-north-africa-and-middle-east-iii-bahrain-revolt, (accessed 30 October 2018), p.6

[297] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*.

[298] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, p. 76

[299] Justin Gengler, "Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shī'a Problem'in Bahrain." *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3.1 (2013): pp. 53-79.

Bandargate of 2006, among the key officials actively using gerrymandering to disrupt the country's demographic composition and to undermine the electoral performance of the Shi'a political societies, including by paying indigent Shi'a to become Sunni and accelerating the naturalization of foreign Sunnis.[300] By the end of February 2011, the Crown Prince had invited forty representatives from political societies, community leaders and social organisations to attend a National Dialogue.[301] The repression of protests had generated hesitations among opposition at the idea of engaging directly with the government, as demonstrators increasingly called for the dismissal of the government.[302] Opposition societies, including al-Wefaq, Wa'ad, the National Democratic Assemblage, the Nationalist Democratic Society, al-Ikha' National Society and the communist-leaning al-Menbar Progressive Democratic Society, ended up putting forward conditions to participate to the Dialogue that included the dismissal of the government - especially the all-powerful Prime Minister, in office since the country's independence in 1971, but also officials in the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interiors and the cabinet - and the establishment of a constitutional assembly.[303] These became sticking points for both sides, as other members in the ruling family, and especially the Prime Minister, undermined the Crown Prince's conciliatory efforts.[304] The dominant view within the regime was that the Shi'a opposition was attempting to exploit the protest wave to corner the leadership into systemic changes to the country's power structures, that would erode the power of the ruling establishment and irreversibly weaken their authority.[305] As the King requested an intervention from the Peninsula Shield forces, encouraged domestically by the Prime Minister and externally by the Saudi leadership, the prospect of a negotiated political solution crumbled.

Against this backdrop, an attempt by the Qatari Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani to mediate between the government of Bahrain and opposition parties had taken

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[300] Louër. "Sectarianism and coup-proofing strategies in Bahrain.", p. 256.
[301] Jane Kinninmont, 'Beyond Bahrain's Dialogue', *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/18/after_ bahrain_s_dialogue. (accessed 23 November 2018)
[302] Ibid.
[303] Adam Hanieh. "Bahrain.", p. 83
[304] Ibid.
[305] Interview of the author with a Bahraini diplomat, London, 29 May 2019; Interview of the author with a European diplomat based in Bahrain, Skype, 29 May 2019.

place behind the scenes, until it was reportedly rejected by the government.[306] The GCC governments had been consistently expressing support and solidarity with the Bahraini government since February 2011.[307] They had pledged 20 billion dollars to assist Bahrain and Oman and issued a statement rejecting 'any foreign attempt to tamper with their [Bahrain's] security'.[308] In fact, at that point, several Bahraini officials, including from the Bahrain Defence Forces, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, had described in separate statements demonstrators as 'leaders of discord' or 'terrorist plotters' who conspired on behalf of foreign countries to undermine the security and stability of Bahrain.[309] Opposition leaders argued that, instead, it was the GCC intervention to have internationalised an internal issue, providing the pretext for Iran to interfere.[310] The Peninsula Shield intervention in Bahrain was strongly criticised by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who also protested formally with the local Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Bahraini Chargé d'Affaires, and called the UN Secretary General to take an active role in the matter.[311] The Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, weighted in by stating that the 'victory of the people of Bahrain was inevitable', underlining that 'Iran is predicated on defending the people and their rights against all dictatorial and egotistical rulers without distinguishing between Sunnis and Shi'a' and specifically condemning Saudi Arabia for its intervention.[312]

However, the Peninsula Shield intervention effectively ended only the first phase of the Bahraini Spring. In June 2011 the King suspended the state of emergency and the Peninsula Shield forces begun to gradually leave the country. The second phase of the Bahraini Spring had begun, characterised by two main trends. On one hand, both protests and the crackdown continued, diluted over

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[306] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, p. 140
[307] Fred Lawson and Matteo Legrenzi. "Repression and Monarchical Resilience in the Arab Gulf States." *The International Spectator* 52.1 (2017): pp. 76-87
[308] "Bayan sadir 'an al-dawra al-thamina ba'da al mi'a lil majlis al-wizari" [Statement of the 118th session of the ministerial council], http://www.gcc-sg.org/indexb18f.html?action=Sec-Show&ID=316, (accessed 23 November 2018)
[309] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, p. 148
[310] Elisheva Machlis. "Al-Wefaq and the February 14 uprising: Islam, nationalism and democracy." *Middle Eastern Studies* 52.6 (2016): pp. 978-995
[311] Mitra Amiri, "Iran objects to foreign troops in Bahrain" *Reuters*, 15 March 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-bahrain-troops-idUSLDE72E02N20110315 (accessed 23 November 2018)
[312] Bassiouni, et al., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, p. 152

the years, as their intensity was inversely proportional in time. Initially, protests were more frequent, peaking between the first anniversary of the Spring – February 2012 – and the Formula 1 Grand Prix hosted in Manama – in April 2012.[313] On March 9, 2012 over 100.000 people attended a demonstration calling for the release of political detainees and chanting against the King, with Sheikh Isa Qassim from al-Wefaq as their symbolic leader.[314] As the crackdown intensified and extended, focusing predominantly on Shi'a opposition, accused continuously of harbouring a foreign agenda, protests became less frequent.[315] The Shi'a opposition itself crumbled. Already in April 2011 the government had attempted to dissolve al-Wefaq for 'undertaking activities that harmed social peace, national unity, and inciting disrespect for constitutional institutions.'[316] While initially failing to do so, both al-Wefaq and al-Wa'ad were eventually disbanded between 2016 and 2017.[317] The leader of al-Wefaq, Sheikh Ali Salman, was arrested in December 2014, and was handed a life sentence on charges of spying for Qatar - interestingly, not Iran - in November 2018, while Sheikh Isa Qassim was stripped of his nationality in 2016 and accused to 'serve foreign interests' and promote 'sectarianism and violence'.[318] Even the civil society was thoroughly scrutinised: there were politically-motivated mass firings in the public sector as University students and employees of state-owned firms were required to sign 'loyalty oaths'.[319] As large protests faded away, dissent turned into sporadic acts of violence by radicalised youth, opening the second trend of this new phase of the Spring, to be treated in following paragraphs.

To conceptualise the the Bahraini leadership's perceptions of the Arab Spring protests, it seems necessary to highlight how Bahrain's socio-political history can

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[313] Matthiesen, *Sectarian gulf.*

[314] "Popular protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): the Bahrain Revolt", p.9

[315] Lawson and Legrenzi. "Repression and Monarchical Resilience in the Arab Gulf States.".

[316] "Bahrain moves to ban opposition" *Financial Times*, 14 April 2011.

[317] "Bahrain court dissolves main secular opposition group" *BBC News*, 31 May 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40104731; "Bahrain court orders Shia opposition group to be dissolved", *The Guardian*, 17 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/17/bahrain-al-wefaq-shia-opposition-group-sunni (accessed 23 November 2018)

[318] "Bahrain revokes top Shia cleric Isa Qassim's citizenship", *BBC News*, 20 June 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36578000 ; "Bahrain Opposition Leaders Sentenced to Life in Qatar Spying Case", *The New York Times*, 4 November 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/04/world/middleeast/bahrain-sheikh-ali-salman-spying-qatar.html (accessed 23 November 2018)

[319] Adam Hanieh. "Bahrain.", p. 82

be read in alternating cycles of struggles and repression. Only six months before the beginning of the protests in February 2011, in the summer of 2010, the Bahraini youth, especially but not exclusively Shi'a, had engaged in mass protests against socio-economic inequality and socio-political marginalization.[320] Before that, a six-years-long uprising had erupted in 1994, which was cross-sectarian and characterised by similar demands for reforms of the economy and the judicial system, and for civil and political rights.[321] Upon his coronation in 1999, King Hamad offered such a programme of reforms, contained in the National Action Charter (NAC), pledging: amnesty for political prisoners, the re-establishment of Parliament abrogated in 1975, the dissolution of repressive state security institutions.[322] Arguably, the failure to meet the expectations raised by the NAC, endorsed in a subsequent referendum with a 98.4 percent vote, only magnified latent discontent.[323] Quite symbolically the day that the Bahraini Spring started, the 14th of February 2011, was the tenth anniversary of the NAC referendum.

This background sheds a light on how structural socio-economic and socio-political vulnerabilities can be defined as chronic in the case of Bahrain. It also highlights how, while the Bahraini government has framed the protests as exogenous - with the sustained narrative of Iran as mastermind of the opposition - those have structural, endogenous roots.[324] Equally relevant is to highlight the regime's draconian reaction to the protests, and demonization of the opposition, described as aiming to 'polarise the country' and push it to the 'brink of the sectarian abyss' or, at best, as an instrument of external actors - first and foremost Iran, but also Qatar - with malicious intent. In fact a member of Bahrain's Consultative Council interviewed by the author argued that: 'While the West supported Shi'a protests with the intent of empowering minorities as a way of

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[320] Ibid., p. 77

[321] Munira Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment" in Sick & Potter (eds), *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium*.

[322] J. E. Peterson, "Bahrain: Reform, Promise, and Reality", in Joshua Teitelbaum (ed.), *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf*. (New York: Columbia University Press), 2009, pp. 157–85.

[323] Ibid., p. 171

[324] In an interview with the author held in Doha on 15 December 2018 a a professor of Arab Gulf states' political economy stated that the 'protests' sectarian character is as overplayed by the regime as much the relevance of massive inequalities in the domestic economic system is downplayed'.

furthering democracy, the regional agent chosen to carry this international agenda, Qatar, pursued its own political goals.'[325]

The magnitude and prolonged duration of the Bahraini protests, the presence of popular, well-organised, hardline and anti-monarchical opposition groups were all significant elements to influence the regime's hyper-securitised outlook after 2011. The socio-political and socio-economic contexts and historical backgrounds in the small Kingdom can be seen as underpinning a long-standing divide-and-rule tactic attributed by scholars to the Bahraini regime, which inevitably generated an exclusionary concept of national identity and the securitisation of sectarian identities. Finally, as a small state in a volatile and conflict-prone region, it would be inadequate to analyse the Bahraini chapter of the Arab Spring without taking into account the context in the wider MENA region and Bahrain's central spot in the power rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, analysed in the following paragraph.

4.2 Bahrain and the 'Shi'a threat'.

Similarly to other countries in the GCC region, but even more so, Bahrain's relations with Iran and the perceptions of Iran's regional posture, are intrinsically related to the government's relations with its Shi'a citizens. This has been a recurrent trope, with bilateral relations slightly improving when the Bahraini Shi'a communities were more acquiescent and rapidly deteriorating as the communities became more restive.[326] Since the 2011 uprising, in fact, Bahrain-Iran relations have entered a downward spiral. To better dissect this consequentiality, and the post-2011 evolutions in the Bahraini leadership's perceptions, a few elements are worth considering, including: zooming in on the local Shi'a communities and links with Iran; the historical context of bilateral relations, the few instances of functional collaboration, the regionalization of domestic politics.

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[325] Interview of the author with a member of Bahrain's Consultative Council (Shura), London, 6 November 2018.
[326] "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge", Middle East Report N°40, *International Crisis Group,* 6 May 2005.

Although official data are not available, it is widely suggested by scholars that as much as 60 percent of the Bahraini population is Shi'a.[327] While a minority of this community is thought to be of Persian descent, or Ajam, the majority is reportedly Baharna, i.e. descending from indigenous Arab population.[328] Bahraini Shi'a mostly follow the Ja'afari School of jurisprudence, characterised by a highly hierarchical and structured religious establishment.[329] Bahrainis follow several religious guides, including Iran's Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei - who subscribes to the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih, granting political authority and legitimacy to the religious establishment – and Iraq's Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, who instead does not adhere to Wilayat al-Faqih.[330] While officially there are no Bahraini religious guides, Bahrainis follow influential local scholars such as Sheikh Isa Qassim, Sheikh Mohamed Mahfouz, Sheikh Abdulla Ghurayfi.[331] For decades Bahraini Shi'a have conveyed a sense of institutionalised and informal discrimination by the government against the community. Shi'a citizens are informally cut off from several positions in the public sector, the country's largest employer, and specifically positions within the security sector, generously awarded to naturalised Sunni foreigners, in a move thought to be about altering the sectarian balance of the country in favour of the Sunnis as much as about creating a security sector more prone to repress Shi'a.[332] More generally, levels of unemployment and underemployment are disproportionally high among Shi'a, in a country boasting a 30 percent level of unemployment overall in 2010.[333] Additionally, Shi'a citizens long lamented how obtaining land or social housing or

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[327] See Justin Gengler. "Al-Fātiḥ Wa Al-Maftūḥ: The Case of Sunni-Shi'i Relations in Bahrain." *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf: Rethinking the Rentier State*, (Indiana University Press), 2015, pp. 38–63; "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge", *International Crisis Group*.

[328] Gengler. "Al-Fātiḥ Wa Al-Maftūḥ".

[329] For more details on the Shi'a schools of jurisprudence see: Mahmood Iftekhar, *Shiism: A Religious and Political History of the Shi'a Branch of Islam* (Pine House Publishers, 2007)

[330] On Wilayat al-Faqih¸ see Rainer Brunner & Werner Ende (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political Culture*, Brill Publishing, 2000

[331] Sajjad Rizvi. "Political mobilization and the Shi'i religious establishment (marja'iyya)." *International Affairs* 86.6 (2010): pp. 1299-1313.

[332] Louër. "Sectarianism and coup-proofing strategies in Bahrain.", Interview of the author with a researcher in the team of the Bassiouni report, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.

[333] Wright. "Fixing the Kingdom.", p. 7

non-basic healthcare, especially in a period of low oil prices, would become especially difficult for their community.[334]

Beyond socio-economic grievances, even the country's foundational myth is contested, including on a sectarian basis. On one hand, 'Bahraini Arab Shi'a consider themselves the true original inhabitants of Bahrain and surrounding smaller islands' and often present the al-Khalifa as 'foreign usurpers.'[335] On the other hand, court-sponsored historians usually describe the al-Khalifa as a pacifying force, ending a period of insecurity and instability.[336] What is certain is that in its rich history, the strategically-located Bahraini archipelago has long been contested by Persian and Arab polities.[337] Effective territorial control begun to be exerted by the Persians with the Safavid Empire in the wake of the Portuguese withdrawal from the island in 1602, and lasted until 1717.[338] After a string of vicissitudes, in 1783 the al-Khalifa tribe, emanating from the Arabian Peninsula, conquered the islands from their base in Zubarah, today's Qatar, with assistance from other Arabian tribes.[339] However, long-standing Iranian claims to the sovereignty of Bahrain perdured and intensified during the British protectorate of Bahrain, in 1906 and 1927, and again in the 1950s, when the Iranian Parliament passed the Oil Nationalization Act and officially designated Bahrain its fourteenth province for the purpose of oilfields' exploitation (1957).[340] The question re-surfaced ahead of the British withdrawal from the East of Suez and the prospect of Bahraini independence in 1971, which the Shah of Iran pragmatically accepted after regional negotiations and in light of a United Nations-sanctioned plebiscite expressing the locals' preference for an al-Khalifa rule.[341] However, sporadic Iranian claims on Bahrain persisted over the years: in 2007 an editorial appearing on Kayhan, an Iranian newspaper with ties to the Supreme Leader, rejected the

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[334] "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge".

[335] Gengler. "Al-Fātiḥ Wa Al-Maftūḥ", p. 40

[336] Ibid., p. 42

[337] Steven Wright, "Iran's Relations with Bahrain." in Gawdat Bahgat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Neil Quilliam (eds), *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 61

[338] Ibid.

[339] Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain", in Davidson (ed), *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, p. 33.

[340] Majid Khadduri. "Iran's Claim to the Sovereignty of Bahrayn." *American Journal of International Law* 45.4 (1951): pp. 631-647.

[341] Husain Al-Baharna, "The Fact-Finding Mission of the United Nations Secretary-General and the Settlement of the Bahrain-Iran Dispute, May 1970," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1973): p. 541.

legitimacy of Bahrain's independence from Iran and two years later Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, working in Khamenei's office, again publicly argued that Bahrain was Iranian territory.[342]

A momentous turn of events happened between the 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1981 attempted coup d'état in Bahrain. After 1979, Iranian hardliners, such as Ayatollah Sadeq Rohani questioned the *status quo* sanctioned by the Shah with regards to Bahrain sovereignty, adding to the Gulf Arab leaders concerns that Iran wanted to export the Khomeinist revolution throughout the region.[343] In fact, such concerns of contagion extended to Saudi Arabia, where the local Shi'a community has close ties with that of Bahrain, and it is argued that in the aftermath of 1979, Saudi Arabia sped up the construction of the causeway linking it to Bahrain 'so that the Saudi military could quickly reinforce the Bahraini regime when necessary.'[344] These fears escalated in 1981 when an organisation calling itself the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) attempted to overthrow the al-Khalifa rule to establish a 'free Islamic order'.[345] The organization was led by Hadi al-Mudarrisi, who claimed to be Ayatollah Khomeini's representative in Bahrain, and, according to the Bahraini government, received support and training in terms of ideology, leadership, media, logistics and military from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[346] The IFLB was disbanded with the arrest of 73 Gulf Arab nationals, including Bahrainis, Saudis, one Kuwaiti and one Omani, but the impact of these events on the decision-makers' psyche were long-lasting: the episode consolidated the perception that Iran had initiated an asymmetric campaign carried on by penetrating local communities and establishing proxies.[347]

As a matter of fact, the Bahraini government again accused Iran of being behind the protests taking place in the country between 1994 and 1999, as the state

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[342] Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry", *Middle East Policy Council*, Volume XIX, Number 2, Summer 2012.

[343] Wright, "Iran's Relations with Bahrain."

[344] Simon Henderson, "Saudi Arabia's Fears for Bahrain", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2011, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3309. (accessed 24 November 2018).

[345] Hasan Tariq Alhasan, "The role of Iran in the failed coup of 1981: the IFLB in Bahrain." *The Middle East Journal* 65.4 (2011), p. 605

[346] Ibid., p. 603

[347] Interview of the author with a Bahraini diplomat, London, 29 May 2019; Wright, "Iran's Relations with Bahrain." p. 69

television claimed some protest leaders had confessed belonging to a previously unknown Iranian proxy named Hezbollah al-Bahraini.[348] At that time, allegations were also made by the government that the years-long permanence of al-Wefaq spiritual leader Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim in Qom indicated he was complicit with the group.[349] When al-Wefaq won 16 out of 40 seats in the 2006 parliamentary elections, just as a Shi'a-led government was ascending to power in Iraq, regime hardliners started to fear the Shi'a opposition would try to undermine the al-Khalifa from within the institutions.[350] In a press conference, al-Wefaq Secretary-General Sheikh Ali Salman vowed to the party's large base to revoke legislation limiting manifestations of dissent in the country, including the Law of Associations, the Counter-Terrorism Law and the Law of Assembly as well as to challenge the division of electoral constituencies, perceived as favouring Sunni tribes loyal to the rulers.[351] On the other hand, there was at this time a strong interest in the Bahraini Shi'a community to participate to the country's politics through its institutional mechanisms, coupled with a declared rejection of the Islamic Republic as a model for emulation.[352]

Interestingly, the second half of the 2000s was also a period of, short-lived and limited, collaboration between Manama and Tehran. In 2008, the two countries began negotiations over Iran exporting 1.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day via an underwater pipeline to Bahrain and a possible $4 billion Bahraini investment into Iran's South Pars gas field.[353] In 2010 border negotiations, stalled since 1993, resumed in Tehran.[354] In June of the same year, Bahrain's Foreign Minister Sheik Khalid stated that Bahraini News Agency reports 'accusing Tehran

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[348] Hanieh. "Bahrain.", p. 71

[349] Rizvi. "Political mobilization and the Shi'i religious establishment (marja'iyya).", p. 1301

[350] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, p. 92

[351] Ibid.

[352] Senior Islamic Action Society clerics interviewed in Manama, Bahrain in 2006 told RAND that 'while they viewed Iran with spiritual and emotional affinity, there was little support for its political system or policies in the region.', Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat and Jennifer Li, "Arab Perceptions of the Iranian Threat" in *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent* (RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 150

[353] "Bahrain to press on with Iran gas deal," *Financial Times*, 24 October 2008, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d590232a-a162-11dd-82fd-000077b07658.html#axzz1RvTNGCJK (accessed 23 November 2018)

[354] "Iran, Bahrain to Review Border Issues," *Fars News Agency*, 25 May 2010, http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8903040735, (accessed 23 November 2018)

of seeking to expand its power and influence in the region' in no way 'mirror…our keenness on the development of bilateral relations' and that his government 'totally reject[ed]' the underlying anti-Iranian sentiment.[355] It was in this context that the first protests reached Bahrain in August 2010 and then the Arab Spring erupted in February 2011.

Ascertaining the exact level of Iranian involvement within Bahrain's protests is problematic and Shi'a activists have long argued that the ruling al-Khalifa family exaggerates Iranian influence to tarnish their calls for democratization.[356] On the other hand the perception that Iran has exploited the protests to extend its influence in Bahrain, in a more nuanced approach than the official narrative that Iran was the movement's mastermind suggests, is widespread in both Manama's leadership circle and among some opposition figures.[357] These perceptions were aroused by a number of factors. Interviewees pointed to the involvement in the protests of the Islamic Action group, or Amal, led by former IFLB leader Hadi al-Modarresi.[358] It was also concerning that Hassan Mushaimaa, a member of the al-Haq society, told the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar that if Saudi Arabia intervened to defend the al-Khalifa, Iran would step in to support the Bahraini opposition.[359] Also problematically, in June 2011 Shi'a theologian Mehdi Khalaji, while advocating for Iranian support to the opposition, described Sheikh Isa Qassim as a 'religious representative of Khamenei, collecting taxes for the Supreme Leader, propagating his religious authority, and encouraging people to follow him' and stressed that Khamenei had described Qassim as 'a star in the sky of Shi'a'.[360] As mentioned earlier, Iranian officials did respond very vocally to the GCC and Bahraini repression of Shi'a protesters. On their part, a number of

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[355] Habib Toumi, "Shaikh Khalid receives Iran's ambassador to Bahrain," *Gulf News*, 22 June 2010, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/shaikh-khalid-receives-iran-s-ambassador-to-bahrain-1.644721, (accessed 23 November 2018)

[356] Frederic Wehrey et al., "Arab Perceptions of the Iranian Threat" p. 150; Interview of the author with a prominent Bahraini Shi'a activist, London, 19 September 2018.

[357] Interview of the author with a researcher in the team of the Bassiouni report, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018; Interview of the author with a prominent Bahraini Shi'a activist, London, 19 September 2018; Interview of the author with a Bahraini diplomat, London, 29 May 2019; Interview of the author with a Bahrain-based senior researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Skype, 17 April 2019.

[358] Ibid.

[359] Mabon. "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry".

[360] Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain", *Washington Institute for Peace*, 27 June 2011, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3376, (accessed 23 November 2018)

Shi'a clerics, identifying themselves as 'followers of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei in Bahrain' had reportedly wrote to the Supreme Leader in March 2011 soliciting his help.[361]

Certainly the perceptions of Iran's malicious intent in the GCC was shared and fuelled by Saudi Arabia. Just days before the Peninsula Shield operation, the Saudi newspaper al-Jazirah featured a series of articles titled 'Safavid Iran's plans for the destruction of the Gulf States,' detailing a sophisticated Iranian scheme to exploit anarchy in Bahrain to annex it to the Islamic Republic and contextualising it into the narrative of the Shi'a Crescent, i.e. the expansion of Iranian influence in Lebanon and Iraq.[362] In fact, one of the strongest impact of the 2011 uprising on Bahraini politics has been the further consolidation of its relations with Saudi Arabia, which has not only become increasingly an economic lifeline for Bahrain, but also a major source of policy-making indications.[363] For instance, on the JCPOA, the Bahraini leadership sided completely with Saudi Arabia, emphatically accusing Teheran of using the resources freed by sanctions relief to train and fund subversive Shi'a groups to sabotage the ruling regimes in both Manama and Riyadh.[364]

By 2014, few radicalized groups akin to a low-intensity insurgency-like movement had started employing sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against the Bahraini security forces. In 2015 Bahrain Public Security Chief Major-General Tariq Al-Hassan described a new militia, called Saraya al-Ashtar, stating: 'There are clear similarities between the tactics, techniques and procedures used in manufacturing the explosives found in Bahrain and those used by Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps proxy groups, particularly Kata'eb Hezbollah, in Iraq and Afghanistan'.[365] Saraya al-Ashtar (also known as Al-Ashtar Brigades) is, alongside other similar organizations such as Saraya al-Mukhtar, and Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya, included in the blacklists of terrorist organizations issued by the Saudi-led quartet in the context of the 2017 intra-GCC crisis. Its leaders, Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, were both designated in 2017 as terrorists by the US State Department, in a statement

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[361] Ibid.
[362] Mabon. "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry".
[363] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters.*
[364] Wright, "Iran's Relations with Bahrain.".
[365] Press release, Ministry of Interior of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 19 June 2015.

arguing that they are based in Iran and that the organization is supported and funded by the IRGC.[366] The Bahraini government has also reported several operations, from 2013 onwards, of seizing Iranian-sent weapons.[367] These weapons have allegedly included explosives, automatic weapons, electric detonators, grenades and ammunition.[368] Nine attacks have been reported in 2017 by Bahrain's Ministry of Interior, allegedly causing seven casualties and twenty-four injured among the security forces.[369] The perceptions among the security officials is that this armed diffuse resistance is part of an Iranian scheme: 'The first level involves leveraging Iranian soft power through the establishment of cultural centres named Husseiniyat, mosques to disseminate the ideology of Wilayat al-Faqih and recruit potential candidates for opposition movements. The next level is to strengthen opposition movements, especially their leadership, through operational training and further theological study in Iran and then set up a network of underground cells responding to the IRGC'.[370]

As argued by expert on Bahrain Steve Wright, 'Iran is seen by the government of Bahrain as an external party to domestic politics within the country and one which works against developing a common national identity.'[371] In other words, Iran is seen to exploit the country's most significant socio-economic and socio-political vulnerabilities, inscribed even in its foundational myth, one of sectarian disenfranchisement. In sum, after 2011, the Bahraini leadership has perceived Iran consistently as a political threat, able and willing to challenge the regime's identity and stability and the integral functioning of the institutions and borders. While the economic dimension of the threat may be lacking, as economic engagement is minimal, there is a clear (asymmetric) military dimension to this

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[366] "State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi," U.S. Department of State, 17 March 2017.
[367] Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt. "The Evolution of Shia Insurgency in Bahrain." *Combating Terrorism Center* 11.1 (2018).
[368] Ibid.
[369] Ahmad Majidyar, "Bahraini FM says Iran-linked bank sponsored terrorism in island kingdom", *Middle East Institute,* 4 April 2018, https://www.mei.edu/publications/bahraini-fm-says-iran-linked-bank-sponsored-terrorism-island-kingdom.
[370] Remarks by Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) Field Marshal Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa to a delegation of parliamentarians from the European Parliament, 2 November 2016, Manama.
[371] Wright, "Iran's Relations with Bahrain." p. 79.

threat's perception, allegedly conveyed by underground Bahraini cells intent on triggering an anti-monarchical insurgency on behalf of Tehran.

4.3 Bahrain and the 'Islamist threat'.

Formed in 1984, al-Minbar is the political arm of a social organization called al-Islah, running charity, educational, and social programs in Bahrain since 1941.[372] Established under the name Student's Club by students at the Al-Hedaya Al-Khalifiya school in Muharraq, a largely Sunni governorate, considered to be their stronghold, the Bahraini al-Islah was in fact the forerunner of similar, Brotherhood-affiliated organizations in the Gulf.[373] The group was then renamed al-Islah Club in 1948 and al-Islah Society in 1980.[374] One of its founders was Abdulrahman Al-Jowder, who had studied in Cairo, where he came in contact with individuals of the Brotherhood leadership, including leading ideologue Hassan al-Banna.[375] Interestingly, in a diversion from the typical pattern of Brotherhood-affiliated groups in the GCC, the Bahraini al-Minbar was not overwhelmingly reliant on professionals or intellectuals from North Africa or the Levant in its initial phase. Many of al-Minbar's members were Bahraini *Hawala*, a socio-political group of Sunni Arabs who migrated to Persia before returning to the Arabian Peninsula's eastern shore.[376] As elsewhere in the region, individuals from the *Hawala* group took advantage of their international background, gradually rising to be part of the country's merchant elite. However, as al-Minbar society grew and became more entrenched in the national fabric, new members tended to be middle-class professionals.[377] Additionally, in a pattern common to other GCC states, al-Islah members were especially active in institutions and bureaucracies concerned with the education portfolio.[378]

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[372] *Baquer al-Najjar, Al-Harakat al-Diniyya fi al-Khalij al-Arabi* (Religious Movements of the Gulf), (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2007), pp. 30-45

[373] Ibid.

[374] Peterson, "Bahrain: Reform, Promise and Reality," p. 165

[375] Interview with Saleh 'Ali," *Ikhwanonline*, 17 November 2006.

[376] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* p. 59

[377] Ibid.

[378] Marc Valeri, "Islamist Political Societies in Bahrain: Collateral Victims of the 2011 Popular Uprising," in Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Paola Rivetti (eds) *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2018, p. 168.

However, at least initially, the society's political traction was meagre. In 1973, Abdulrahman Al-Jowder ran in the very first Bahraini parliamentary elections and only won 73 votes.[379] A turning point for the political profiling of the society was the establishment of al-Minbar and their posture vis-à-vis the 1990s Bahraini uprisings. Then, the society published a work entitled "This is Our Statement", declaring that the group had no interest in joining the political action taken by other opposition forces, thus inaugurating a loyalist trend which has persisted since.[380] In fact, the group was then permitted to operate, even when other political societies where obstructed.[381] In 2002, in the first parliamentary elections after the NAC constitutional reform, amid a boycott from the Shi'a opposition, al-Minbar won eight seats in Bahrain's 40-seats House of Representatives, making it the biggest group in the chamber.[382] Since then, al-Minbar has won seats in each parliamentary elections.

Largely speaking, the group's political agenda, focusing on social welfare and education, has been in support of the monarchy's agenda and is generally described by the term loyalist in the relevant academic research or policy analyses.[383] A member of Bahrain's Shura interviewed by the author described them as highly flexible and politically astute: 'Differently from Brotherhood members in other Gulf nations, the Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain works with the government sharing benefits and achieving important positions in official agencies. They traditionally worked with the government also because an empowerment of the Shi'a would be very problematic for them.'[384] In fact, al-Minbar's loyalist position only occasionally has been put into question. For instance, the Sunni society cooperated with the Shi'a, Islamist-leaning opposition party al-Wefaq, but only temporarily and on well-defined issues. In 2005, both al-

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[379] Adam Hanieh. "Bahrain.", p. 73.
[380] Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat wa al-Jama'iyyat al-Siyyasiyya fi al-Bahrain*, 2008, p. 185.
[381] Ibid.
[382] Courtney Freer, "The Changing Islamist Landscape of the Gulf Arab States", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 21 November 2016, p. 7.
[383] See for example: Freer, "The Changing Islamist Landscape of the Gulf Arab States"; Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: Prospects for Agitation" 10 June 2013, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,* https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-muslim-brotherhood-in-the-gulf-prospects-for-agitation (accessed 16 November 2018); Kinninmont, "Bahrain", pp. 31–62.
[384] Interview of the author with a member of Bahrain's Consultative Council (Shura), London, 6 November 2018

Minbar and al-Wefaq encouraged land ownership reform, specifically to speed up the process of transferring ownership of unclaimed land to families who had lived on it for a very long period of consecutive time.[385] Beyond the interests-driven convergence on such pragmatic questions, the interaction between al-Minbar and al-Wefaq went through heated periods, notably in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war. Some of the most vocal parliamentarians, such as Muhammad Khalid Ibrahim, submitted a motion in 2004 for a resolution in support of Iraq's besieged Sunnis, rejected by al-Wefaq, and accused the Shi'a party to foment sectarianism in Bahrain on the encouragement of Iran.[386]

In fact, beyond the specific issues, the convergence between the Bahraini government and al-Minbar has been grounded in the long-standing socio-political gymnastic of Shi'a-Sunni relations in the country. Thorough the years, groups such as al-Minbar and the Salafi al-ʾAsalah Society have proven to be highly useful allies to the government, providing an avenue of leverage within the Sunni community in a context of the sectarian divide-and-rule tactics at times employed by the government. In parliament, the support of the Sunni al-Minbar society for government policies has been, often, crucial to offset the opposition parties, and especially the Shi'a-majority party, al-Wefaq. For example, al-Minbar has consistently supported the necessity to respect the role of the fully royally-appointed Consultative Council (Shura), which has the same authority of the elected chamber, the Council of Representatives (Nuwab).[387] The convergence between al-Minbar and a few, key members of the government specifically, is taken as such a sure fact that many believe members of the Bahrain's Royal Court and executives from the Islamic bank sector have effectively been bankrolling the group.[388] Al-Minbar is also closely connected to some members of the al-Khalifa family: one of the King's uncles, ʿIsa bin Muhammad al-Khalifa,

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[385] "Bahrain: Change in Law Regarding Land Ownership," *Al Bawaba*, 22 May 2005.
[386] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, p. 60
[387] "Interview with Saleh 'Ali," *Ikhwanonline*, 17 November 2006.
[388] This was for instance alleged in a diplomatic cable sent by the U.S. Embassy in Manama to the Secretary of State Washington on the 4 September 2008, and published by Wikileaks under the code 08MANAMA592. The cable can be read at: "A field guide to Bahraini Political Parties", *The Telegraph*, 18 February 2011, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/bahrain-wikileaks-cables/8334582/A-FIELD-GUIDE-TO-BAHRAINI-POLITICAL-PARTIES.html, (accessed 16 November 2018).

a former labour and social affairs Minister, was involved in the early stages of its parent society's establishment, al-ʾIslah, and run it between 1963 and 2013.[389]

The convergence between the government and the main Sunni parties, both al-Minbar and al-'Asalah, has become particularly salient after the Arab Spring. 'In 2011, 2012, these groups were important and even essential for the mass counter-mobilisation that they helped to organise,' stated Justin Gengler, senior researcher at the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute of Qatar University and long-time expert on Bahrain.[390] Indeed, during and after the 2011 protests al-Minbar's was a mixture of support for the security forces and criticism of government concessions to al-Wefaq.[391] In 2011, al-Minbar and al-Asalah claimed they created a 'national unity front to defend Bahraini stability and the al-Khalifa rule' and denounced protesters as Iranian agents and the protests as 'sectarian, violent and a reflection of terrorism'.[392] In January 2012, al-Minbar parliamentarian Sheikh Mohammed Khalid took to Twitter to dismiss the protestors as 'traitors' and as 'agents of Iran' and called for violent retribution: 'If you see a traitor crossing the road, you must run them over and keep going,' he tweeted.[393] In February 2013, al-Minbar boycotted the National Dialogue to protest against the hostile attitude of al-Wefaq and both al-Minbar – and al-'Asalah - even criticized the ruling family for responding too softly to Shi'a dissent.[394] In 2011 even the Doha-based spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, vocally condemned Bahrain's protesters, denouncing them as motivated by 'foreign forces', a clear adherence to the Bahraini government narrative of protesters being backed and supported by Iran.[395] In fact, the government had no major reactions to the 'widely publicized'

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[389] Among a number of sources, this information is cited in: J. E. Peterson, "Bahrain", p. 165; Valeri, "Islamist Political Societies in Bahrain".

[390] Justin Gengler, qtd. in Alex MacDonald, "Sunni Islamists Could Face Uphill Struggle in Bahrain Elections," *Middle East Eye*, 20 November 2014, http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/sunni-islamists-could-face-uphill-struggle-bahrain-elections-1404489268, (accessed 16 November 2018)

[391] Valeri, "Islamist Political Societies in Bahrain".

[392] Machlis, "Al-Wefaq and the February 14 Uprising," p. 985.

[393] The tweet is quoted in MacDonald, "Sunni Islamists Could Face Uphill Struggle in Bahrain Elections".

[394] Valeri, "Islamist Political Societies in Bahrain".

[395] Mohamed Alarab, "Qaradawi Says Bahrain's Revolution Sectarian," *Al Arabiya News*, 19 March 2011, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/19/142205.html, (accessed 16 November 2018).

encounters between al-Minbar representatives and al-Qaradawi in Doha.[396] Al-Qaradawi would later be included in the Saudi and Emirati-led bloc's 2017 blacklists of Qatar-backed 'supporters of terrorism'.[397]

The amicable approach of the government towards al-Minbar stands in stark contrast to the Saudi and Emirati aggressive campaigns against the Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, highlighting, as explored in other chapters, a markedly different perception. Therefore the years following the Arab Spring, when the relations between Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became much closer, to a certain extent resembling dependence for Manama, have exposed a new conundrum for the ruling family. The conundrum came to the forefront when both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in March and November 2014 respectively, amid the background of the 2014 intra-GCC crisis.[398] The strategy of al-Minbar was to highlight the differences between themselves and more oppositional Brotherhood-affiliated groups elsewhere in the region, a long-standing point in the group's narrative. Immediately, the society's President declared to the press: 'All eyes of the voters are on us as they say we are the Muslim Brotherhood, which is not right. It is the ideology that we follow, but we do not have the organization in Bahrain – neither do we support it.'[399] In fact, the group is described in the literature as having close connections with the Muslim Brotherhood's Kuwaiti branch and, to a lesser extent, Egypt's.[400] Abdulrahman Jowder, one of al-Islah founders, was also a founding member of the council for mosques of the Muslim World League and of the Kuwait-based Islamic Charitable Organizations, the original nucleus of the Kuwaiti Brotherhood-affiliated party.[401] However, al-Minbar's argument seemed

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[396] Kylie Moore-Gilbert, "A Band of (Muslim) Brothers? Exploring Bahrain's Role in the Qatar Crisis", *Middle East Institute*, 3 August 2017, http://www.mei.edu/publications/band-muslim-brothers-exploring-bahrains-role-qatar-crisis, (accessed 16 November 2018).
[397] "قطر ترعاها إرهابية ومؤسسات أفراد على حظر :مشترك بيان" [Joint Statement: A ban on individuals and terrorist institutions sponsored by Qatar], *Sky News*, 8 June 2017, http://bit.ly/2tBxhFn, (accessed 16 November 2018)
[398] "UAE lists Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group", *Reuters*, 15 November 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-politics-brotherhood/uae-lists-muslim-brotherhood-as-terrorist-group-idUSKCN0IZ0OM20141115 , (accessed 16 November 2018)
[399] Ali Ahmed, qtd. in MacDonald, "Sunni Islamists Could Face Uphill Struggle in Bahrain Elections".
[400] Baquer al-Najjar, *Al-Harakat*, p. 33
[401] Ibid.

to resonate well with the government's discourse. In March 2014, at a press conference in Islamabad, Bahrain's Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, commented that his government was not labelling al-Minbar a terrorist organization because the group respected the rule of law and had not acted against the security of the country, distinguishing between the international Muslim Brotherhood organization and its domestic movements.[402] His statements, while emphasizing Bahrain's understanding of the Saudi-Emirati hawkish strategy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, contradicted the narrative coming from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Crucially, later the same day the Minister issued a clarification via his official Twitter account which partially contradicted his previous words and fell back in line with the Saudi-Emirati narrative: 'The Muslim Brotherhood movement is a global movement with a single approach (…), and will be dealt with according to the law of each country and the covenants to which it is party.'[403] Despite this rhetorical teetering, in practice the government took steps which also pressured al-Minbar in 2014. Ahead of the parliamentary elections that year, an electoral reform was implemented to redraw the boundaries of electoral districts, affecting also the strongholds of the Sunni Islamist formations: consequently, al-Minbar only retained one seat in the Council of Representatives, down from two in the previous legislature.[404]

Year	Number of al-Minbar MPs (out of 40)
2002	8
2006	4
2010	2
2014	1

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[402] الخبر, تانالمؤتمر الصحفي المشترك لمعالي وزير الخارجية مع سعادة وزير المواصلات في جمهورية باكس الإسلامية تفاصيل, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain, official website, 20 March 2014, https://www.mofa.gov.bh/Default.aspx?tabid=8266&language=ar-BH&ItemId=4008 (accessed 30 October 2018)

[403] Ibrahim Hatlani, "Bahrain Between its Backers and the Brotherhood", *Carnergie Endowment for International Peace*, 20 May 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/55653 (accessed 30 October 2018)

[404] Moore-Gilbert, "A Band of (Muslim) Brothers?"

Table 4.3: al-Minbar representation in Bahrain's Council fo Representatives (Nuwab), (2002 - 2014)

Al-Minbar was also impacted by a legislation passed in May 2016 attempting to separate religion and politics, i.e. banning any preacher from being a member in any political society or engage in political activities.[405] Although Islamist-leaning al-Wefaq was the main target of such legislation, the law also boded poorly for al-Minbar and al-'Asala. Finally, in 2017, a month after Manama and the rest of the quartet cut ties with Qatar, Bahrain's Foreign Minister declared: 'We consider the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group and anyone who shows sympathy with them will be tried on this basis.'[406] While strongly worded, the declaration was not conducive to a crackdown of al-Minbar members in Bahrain. Indeed, the fact that the statement was given by the Foreign Minister rather than Interior Minister may suggest that, like in 2014, the words were addressed to the international affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than to the domestic organization. On their official Twitter account, al-Minbar reacted by reiterating that it is a 'national institution [….] not subject to any external dictates' and voicing support for the state's efforts to provide security and stability in Bahrain. [407]

By tracing the evolution of al-Minbar's relations with the Bahraini government, especially after 2011, it can be argued that this group isn't perceived as a threat with the capability and intent to undermine the regime's stability and identity, or the integrity of the country's boundaries and the functionality of its institutions. In the face of its priority threat, a Shi'a-led popular uprising, the Bahraini government closed ranks with Sunni Islamists, and well-established political groups such as al-Minbar, to secure their support against the Shi'a opposition.[408] However, despite supporting government interests, al-Minbar is still perceived as posing certain hazards, what are defined by this thesis as risks, to Bahrain's rulers. One

[405] "Bahrain MPs ban mixing of politics and religion", *Gulf News*, 18 May 2016, https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-mps-ban-mixing-of-politics-and-religion-1.1830097, (accessed 30 October 2018)

[406] "Bahrain FM: Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist group", *Al Jazeera*, 6 July 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/bahrain-fm-muslim-brotherhood-terrorist-group-170706140931861.html, (accessed 30 October 2018)

[407] Al Watan News, 6 أمين عام "المنبر": قناة الجزيرة تستخدم أسلوب التدليس لتحقيق انتصارات إعلامية زائفة July 2017, http://alwatannews.net/article/723520?rss=1, (accessed 30 October 2018)

[408] "Popular protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): the Bahrain Revolt"; Interview of the author with a prominent Bahraini Shi'a activist, London, 19 September 2018.

- internal - risk is about their future potential to try and rally a Sunni opposition. A Bahraini diplomat interviewed by the author expressed the concern that Sunni Islamists could try and leverage their political loyalism by entering the game of royal factionalism within Bahrain's ruling family.[409] A member of Bahrain's Shura interviewed by the author stated in 2018: 'They have their own agenda which contradicts national security. But if they want to pursue that they need much bigger network politically, which they don't have.'[410] The political game between the Bahraini government and the Islamists then has to be contextualised in the regional pressures. The Saudi-Emirati efforts to ban the Muslim Brotherhood cannot be overlooked by Bahrain, given its increased dependence form the two fellow GCC countries. Alienating Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to protect al-Minbar, putting into question the investments pledged by those two capitals, vital to the Bahraini state budget, could have highly destabilising consequences for regime stability. In this context, al-Minbar is at times described as a liability of the kind that could be here defined an intermestic risk.

4.4 Bahrain and the 'jihadi threat'.

Despite being a very small country, jihadi groups have had some presence and activities in Bahrain. In fact, individuals affiliated to both al-Qa'ida, first, and Daesh, later, have utilised Bahrain as a base for logistics support to the groups' activities in the wider region.[411] However, their focus has been beyond the Bahraini borders, with limited activities or plotted activities in the country itself. Their local footprint can hardly be disconnected from the much larger weight of Bahrain's problems with sectarianism. These two factors, the intersection with the country's inter-sectarian relations and the extraterritorial focus, have also been pivotal in how the regime has perceived the danger emanating from jihadism, including after 2011.

In the aftermath of al-Qa'ida's attacks in the US, in September 2001, it was announced that six Bahrainis were incarcerated at the US naval base in

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[409] Interview of the author with a Bahraini diplomat, London, 29 May 2019.
[410] Interview of the author with a member of Bahrain's Consultative Council (Shura), London, 6 November 2018.
[411] Kenneth Katzman. *Bahrain: Reform, security, and US policy.* Congressional Research Service Report, 7-5700, 7 August 2017, p. 7

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for their affiliation with al-Qa'ida.[412] The Bahraini government subsequently announced that between 2003 and 2012 it had uncovered local cells linked to al-Qa'ida, engaged in collecting funds for the group as well as training militants to target Western interests, such as the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, stationed in Bahrain.[413] Incidentally, their activities and, to a certain extent, popularity soared with the escalation of sectarian conflicts in neighbouring Iraq and Syria. As upheavals shook the region and the country itself, in 2011 - gaining sectarian colours particularly Bahrain - Sunni extremism in general seemed to reach a new peak. The Bahraini government stepped up its rhetoric against Iran and its proxies in the country and the region, pointing fingers specifically at the Shi'a threat and advocating a fight against their activities.[414] 'They [the government] certainly don't want people to go and fight in Syria, but their rhetoric feeds into this recruitment drive' stated in this regard Toby Matthiesen, a research fellow at the University of Cambridge.[415]

In fact this hawkish rhetoric resonated in the National Assembly through the Salafist al-'Asalah Islamic Society, whose discourse also includes anti-Shi'a sectarian proclamations.[416] Already in 2012 the press started reporting on delegations of al-'Asalah Members of Parliament (MPs) heading into Syria to provide 'donations sent by the Bahrainis' to the Islamist Suqour al-Sham brigade, later renamed as Islamic Front.[417] One of the group's prominent MPs, Abdelhalim Murad, was accused of traveling into Syria to meet with representatives from

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[412] "Premier calls on US to free Bahraini prisoners in Guantanamo Bay", *Al Bawaba*, 24 November 2002

[413] Katzman. *Bahrain: Reform, security, and US policy*, p. 8.

[414] Ahmed K Al-Rawi. "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: Framing the popular protests in Bahrain." *Global Media and Communication* 11.1 (2015): pp. 25-42.

[415] Toby Matthiesen, qtd. in Alex MacDonald, "Sunni Islamists Could Face Uphill Struggle in Bahrain Elections".

[416] Steve L. Monroe, "Salafis in parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf." *Middle East Journal* 66.3 (2012): pp. 409-424.

[417] A report on a Tunisian television show in early 2014 featured an interview with a Bahraini fighter in Syria who claimed to have received direct funding from two al-Asalah MPs, including former society head Sheikh Adil al-Ma'wda. The report can be watched fully at this link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxWt_GpYLpY&feature=youtu.be (accessed 20 November 2018)

Suqur al-Sham and Liwaa Dawud, two radical jihadi, groups and of facilitating the passage of hundreds of Bahrainis to go fight against Bashar al-Assad's forces.[418]

In this context, some of the recruits and resources also went into Daesh. In 2016 it was estimated that over 100 Bahrainis had joined the group. [419] In the same year, a local court convicted 24 citizens, with 16 tried in absentia, of forming a Bahrain-based Daesh cell and revoked their citizenships.[420] The Saudi citizen who perpetrated the jihadist attack in the Imam al-Sadiq Shi'a mosque in Kuwait, in June 2015, also transited via Bahrain.[421] The episode has provided rhetorical ammunition for Shi'a opposition group to denounce Sunni extremist sympathies among the security sector in Bahrain. Many believed that while Daesh's traction is generally considered feeble with the Bahraini public, an ongoing government policy to recruit Sunni police officers from Yemen, Syria, Jordan and Pakistan, might have created a more conducive environment for Sunni extremist ideology in the security sector.[422]

Although a precise number is unavailable, as the government does not release figures on the subject, Sunnis of foreign nationalities in Bahrain's security sector are believed to be several thousands.[423] In 2014, Major General Tariq al-Hassan, the country's chief of public security, published a tweet, then quickly taken down, including Daesh symbols and a quote from the Qu'ran.[424] The gesture was

[418] المنامة: جدل بعد زيارة نواب بحرينيين لسوريا, *CNN Arabic*, 6 August 2012 http://archive.arabic.cnn.com/2012/middle_east/8/6/Bahraini-BMs-Syria/, (accessed 20 November 2018)

[419] Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?", Working Paper no. 22190, *National Bureau of Economic Research*, April 2016, http://www.nber.org/papers/w22190, (accessed 20 November 2018)

[420] "24 citizens, with 16 tried in absentia, of forming a Daesh cell and revoked their citizenships", *Arab News*, 23 June 2016, http://www.arabnews.com/node/943776/middle-east (accessed 22 November 2018)

[421] "Kuwait identifies suicide bomber as Saudi citizen", *Al Jazeera*, 28 June 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/kuwait-suicide-bomber-saudi-citizen-shia-mosque-suicide-150628082226519.html (accessed 20 Novemebr 2018)

[422] Interview of the author with a prominent Bahraini Shi'a activist, London, 19 September 2018; Interview of the author with a Bahraini professor of Gulf politics, Skype, 11 February 2019.

[423] Abdulhadi Khalaf, Omar AlShehabi, and Adam Hanieh. *Transit states: Labour, migration and citizenship in the Gulf*. Pluto Press, 2015.

[424] Bill Law, "Bahrain: The Islamic State threat within", *Middle East Eye*, 14 October 2014, https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/bahrain-islamic-state-threat-within-884335108 (accessed 30 October 2018)

interpreted as a signal of sympathy for the group.[425] In September 2014, Daesh released a propaganda video addressed specifically at Bahraini Sunnis, inviting them to turn against the monarchy and pledge allegiance to Daesh.[426] In the video four armed Bahraini militants accused the al-Khalifa family of having 'inserted themselves as gods next to Allah' by not imposing sharia law in Bahrain and joining the Global Coalition against Daesh.[427] One of the four militants was identified as Mohammed Isa al-Binali, former lieutenant in the Bahraini police force.[428] His presence was significant not only because of his position in the country's security apparatus, but also because he is a member of the al-Binali tribe, a numerous and influential clan, prominent in commerce, with ties to the ruling family.[429] Another member of the clan, Ali Yousif al-Binali, was killed fighting in Syria in May 2014, and their relative Turki al-Binali, became a very prominent member of the group.[430] Turki al-Binali first joined Daesh in Libya in 2013 and subsequently joined to the group in Syria, becoming one of the group's top clerics and propagandist. [431] Even before joining the group, al-Binali was active as a jihadi propagandist, posting on social media, giving sermons in Bahrain, Libya, and Tunisia, protesting outside the American embassy in Manama, while waving pictures of Osama Bin Laden and banners of al-Qa'ida.[432] On one hand, several interviewees have expressed concerns about Turki al-Binali's messages resonating with Salafists and other Sunnis in Bahrain, especially those who dislike the government's liberal social policies and non-militaristic response on Shi'a activism, on the other hand they recognised he was for a long time allowed to 'expand his influence in Bahrain and recruit for his

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[425] Ala'a Shehabi, "Why Is Bahrain Outsourcing Extremism?", *Foreign Policy*, 29 October 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/29/why-is-bahrain-outsourcing-extremism/ (accessed 20 November 2018)

[426] Ibid.

[427] Ibid.

[428] Ahmed Almutawa. "Terrorism measures in Bahrain: proportionality and the interplay between security, civil liberties and political stability." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22.8 (2018), p. 951

[429] Mohammed Ghanim Al-Rumaihi. *Social and political change in Bahrain since the First World War*. Dissertation, Durham University, 1973, p. 50.

[430] Cole Bunzel, "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2016

[431] Cole Bunzel, in "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States" published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2016, calls Turki al-Binali Daesh's mufti.

[432] Shehabi, "Why Is Bahrain Outsourcing Extremism?".

cause with little or no interference from the authorities.'[433] Eventually al-Binali would be among the 24 citizens charged for joining Daesh in 2016 and his citizenship would be revoked. However, a Bahraini dissident interviewed by the author in London posited the government did not follow up with a comprehensive investigation among the Sunni community, out of fear of jeopardizing al-Khalifa's support base, of which the al-Binali family represents a key pillar.[434]

Bahrain's legislative framework against jihadist organizations is in line with international standards and yet it has loopholes that have been exploited by these groups. For instance, while Bahrain is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, there were no public prosecutions of terrorist financing in the period from 2011 to 2014.[435] The 1956 Charity Fundraising Law was amended in 2013 by royal decree, to step up monitoring of terrorism finance and related penalties and yet Bahrain's government has in fact been accused of being slow to shut down funding networks.[436] In the same year another decree provided new tools to the Minister of State for Communications to check extremist discourse on social media. However, beyond specific one-off programs, such as the workshops and seminars for imams organised by the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, there appears to be no overall strategic messaging campaign to counter jihadi narratives and the government begun drafting a National Countering Violent Extremism strategy only in 2016.[437] A review of textbooks and curricula in schools providing Islamic Studies courses has been discussed, but with little clarity as to what kind of discourse will be targeted. [438] On the other hand, law enforcement instruments have been predominantly deployed against members of Shi'a organizations and militias, rather than against Sunni

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[433] Interview of the author with a Bahraini professor of Gulf politics, Skype, 11 February 2019; This perception is especially strong among Bahraini liberals and Shi'a citizens, and has been argued at lenght in the report by Bahrain Mirror, titled
عود الإسلام الجهاديداعش بيننا الدولة البحرينية وصر and published by the Awal Centre in 2015.
[434] Interview of the author with a prominent Bahraini Shi'a activist, London, 19 September 2018.
[435] See the "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Bahrain" by the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, available at http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224823.htm (accessed 14 June 2018)
[436] Almutawa. "Terrorism measures in Bahrain".
[437] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016: Bahrain" by the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, available at http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224823.htm (accessed 14 June 2018).
[438] Ibid.

extremists.[439] In 2017 military courts were granted the right to try civilians accused of threatening state security with a constitutional amendment, but the first death sentence, on December 25, condemned only Shi'a militants.[440] In fact, in 2016, the U.S. State Department Country Report on Terrorism stated that it was complicated to track Bahrain's progress against the domestic threat of Daesh as 'the Bahraini government often did not publicize details about the arrests or convictions of Sunni terrorists'.[441]

Bahraini officials have shown an ambiguous attitude in their rhetoric towards Bahrainis fighting in Iraq and Syria, especially before the string of attacks in the GCC itself, started in 2015. In June 2014, Information Minister Sameera Rajab described Daesh fighters on Twitter as bearers of 'a revolution against the injustice and oppression that has reigned over Iraq for more than 10 years', namely that of the Shi'a-led regime.[442] Certainly, on the other hand, there is a strong determination to prevent the fighters from returning to Bahrain: this was highlighted by several members of Bahrain's Consultative Council (Shura) in a meeting with members of the European Parliament in November 2016, as they remarked how border security was stepped up after 2015, with plans to introduce biometric testing at all ports of entry.[443]

To sum up, it could be argued that, before 2015, Sunni jihadi groups were not perceived as a full-fledged threat or risk to the Bahraini regime and state, as testified by the *laissez-faire* approach of the authorities towards movements of people and resources into Syria and Iraq, as well as the political silence or ambiguous rhetorical stances. However, the perceptions of one of those groups, Daesh, gradually changed, after the first attacks in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 2015. Daesh's rhetoric was unequivocal when they vowed, in one of their videos,

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[439] Marc Owen Jones. "Rotten Apples or Rotten Orchards: Police deviance, brutality and unaccountability in Bahrain." Zed Books Ltd., 2015.
[440] "Bahrain military court issues death sentence for 6 Shiites", *Associated Press*, 25 December 2017, https://www.apnews.com/ecab37d62fdb4c67880417feaecb54d5, (accessed 20 November 2018)
[441] See the "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015" by the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, available at https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm (accessed 20 November 2018)
[442] Shehabi, "Why Is Bahrain Outsourcing Extremism?"
[443] Remarks given during an interparliamentary meeting between members of Bahrain's Shura and members from the European Parliament, Manama, 1 November 2016.

to 'enter Bahrain with blazing guns and behead the King.'[444] Most importantly, the perception of the danger became more severe as it was realised that the group had attracted several among the country's security forces. In fact, this is something that prompted a government source to declare: 'The threat is real, the issue is very serious. These are people from within the security services, from the police and the military. We have people who want to turn Bahrain into part of the new caliphate. And they see the al-Khalifas as the enemy.'[445] Government sources in Manama expressed concern about militant jihadists returning to the Kingdom to attack key individuals from the ruling monarchy, accused of being too aligned with Western powers or state authorities.[446] However, the number of such sympathisers and the long reach of the regime's security forces mitigate the perceptions of these group's capabilities. The Bahraini leadership's perceptions of jihadi groups can thus be described, through the lenses of this thesis' framework, as an internal risk, challenging the identity of the regime by attempting to gain traction from within the country's security sector and even political figures. While potentially this risk could have a military dimension, the fact that there was no full-fledged attack within Bahrain, makes the economic dimension, of deterring investment and trade or targeting critical infrastructures, perceived as more relevant.[447]

4.5 Bahrain's security priorities after 2011.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the entire MENA region has witnessed an increased polarization, on several levels: beyond the upsurge of sectarianism, fuelled by a power fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran, fault lines within the Sunni communities have become deeper, through a competition between a pro-Islamist and an anti-Islamist camp and the advancement of Sunni extremist

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[444] Johnlee Varghese, "Will Enter Bahrain with Blazing Guns and Behead the King; Don't Need Passport, Says ISIS Fighter", *International Business Times*, 8 February 2015, https://www.ibtimes.co.in/will-enter-bahrain-blazing-guns-behead-king-dont-need-passport-says-isis-fighter-622850 (accessed 30 October 2018)

[445] Government official quoted in Law, "Bahrain: The Islamic State threat within".

[446] Remarks by Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) Field Marshal Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa to a delegation of parliamentarians from the European Parliament, 2 November 2016, Manama.

[447] Remarks given during an interparliamentary meeting between members of Bahrain's Shura and members from the European Parliament, Manama, 1 November 2016.

groups challenging the legitimacy of Islamic hereditary monarchies. These regional trends had a profound impact on the security and political agenda of Bahrain's leadership, as much as on their threat perceptions and prioritization. In the words of a Bahrain-based senior researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'The regional context and the timing of events are crucial for a small state like Bahrain'.[448] In light of these developments, as demonstrated above, the Bahraini government has opted for a 'securitisation of the Shiʿa problem'[449]; has been pushed into re-examining its relations with non-violent Islamist groups; has been confronted with the growing traction of jihadist groups within the Sunni community, including within the regime's security sector and socio-political base. In other words, regional trends have had strong internal repercussions, including on partly eroding the regime's traditional loyalist base.

Overall, the Bahraini regime's security priorities after 2011 could be described in two separate phases. The first phase, between the 2011 uprising and the disbanding of al-Wefaq in 2016, was one in which the gravest threat perceived came from the Shi'a opposition, made even more formidable in regime's perceptions by its intermestic connection to Iran. The second phase, which began in 2014 and peaked after 2016, is one in which the regime felt more insulated from internal or intermestic threats and focused on strenghtening relations with external backers, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including at the risk of having to re-examine the composition of its domestic loyalist base.

The first phase was strongly defined by a divide-and-rule strategy, based on sectarianism. Pushed by powerful figures within the ruling family such as the Royal Court Minister, Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, and his brother the Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defense Force, Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, together known as the 'Khawalid', who have also side-lined more conciliatory figures such as the Crown Prince, this strategy has effectively prevented an inclusive approach towards the Shi'a question.[450] Granting political concessions to acquiesce the Shi'a opposition, such as providing inclusion in key institutions, agreeing to constitutional reforms or more power-sharing

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[448] Interview of the author with a Bahrain-based senior researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Skype, 17 April 2019.
[449] Gengler, "Royal Factionalism", pp. 53-79.
[450] Justin Gengler, "Royal Factionalism"; Interview of the author with a prominent Bahraini Shi'a activist, London, 19 September 2018.

mechanisms, would in this view necessarily strengthen the opposition to further challenge the regime's identity. This is the prism through which, it is here argued, one should read the hyper-sensitive perceptions of Iran-supported Shi'a dissident groups, often indicated by regime's officials as the gravest threat to Bahrain's security after 2011. However, following to the extensive crackdowns that followed the protests and peaked in 2016, according to a former prominent MP in al-Wefaq party, 'the opposition was morally crushed and the regime felt much more secure'.[451]

The literature on minority rules has argued that creating a unified, inclusive national identity through official ideology can often be key for political stability and this thesis has identified the lack of socio-political cohesiveness as a major vulnerability for states.[452] In Bahrain, however, the official discourse, historical narratives and ruling ideology have long been exclusive and divisive.[453] Traditionally, national identity was crafted in the image of the ruling dynasty and its history, and the Shi'a community developed, in opposition to that, a nativist myth and cultural identity.[454] This dynamic extends also to symbolic issues such as a date to celebrate the National Day: while it officially falls on December 17, the day that King Hamad first took the throne, the opposition has long called to have it on August 14, the day that Britain officially withdrew from Bahrain.[455] The geopolitical context, and the intermestic nature of the Shi'a threat in regime's perceptions, are relevant factors to explain this choice to embrace divisiveness over a shared national identity. In addition, a scholar on international political economy and expert on Bahrain interviewed by the author has argued that one other reason might be that the scarcity of energy resources and subsequent scarcity of financial wealth has limited the regime's ability to employ large-scale cooptation in exchange for political loyalty, as typical of other rentier economies.[456] 'This has historically triggered a competition for resources that has

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[451] These remarks were part of a speech delivered by a former MP of al-Wefaq party in a closed-door roundtable held in London, 30 November 2018.

[452] See for instance: Haklai, "A minority rule over a hostile majority".

[453] Gengler. "Al-Fātiḥ Wa Al-Maftūḥ"; Interview of the author with a researcher in the team of the Bassiouni report, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.

[454] Ibid.

[455] Ala'a Shehabi, "Bahrain's sovereign hypocrisy", *Foreign Policy*, 14 August 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/14/bahrains-sovereign-hypocrisy/ (accessed 29 November 2018)

[456] Interview of the author with a professor of Arab Gulf states' political economy, Doha, 15 December 2018

been mutually reinforcing divide-and-rule tactics as a way to strengthen regime's stability', he concluded.[457] Most importantly, a divisive strategy has also prevented the establishment of a significant cross-sectarian opposition that would overwhelm the regime depriving it of its main 'otherization' argument for pushback. As Justin Gengler puts is: 'Until now, the government has succeeded in portraying the demands of the Shi'a and secular opposition as unrepresentative of - and even detrimental to - the interests of other citizens by raising the spectre of Iranian or Western influence. The last thing Bahrain's ruling family is prepared to do is sit at the negotiating table with both Shi'a and Sunni political societies.'[458]

However, while as a result of this strategy, 'the Bahraini opposition is weak and demoralised' as argued to the author by a researcher who worked in the team of the Bassiouni report, 'the regime's loyalist base is also smaller than before'.[459] In the past, the unification of the Sunni community behind the leadership has been vital to their security calculus. A prospective alienation of Sunni political groups or tribes can be therefore problematic for the Bahraini regime, which would see the number of its loyalist interlocutors shrink dramatically.[460] For this reason the Bahraini leadership in 2014 has maintained a cautious approach to reining back Sunni Islamist political societies, such as al-Minbar, before acquiescing to the pressure from its much-needed regional allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in 2017. A similar rationale could explain the hesitation to put pressure on large and influential tribes such as the al-Binali clan, or, even more problematically, on the country's security services, in order to scout individuals sympathetic to Sunni extremism. As the government has been compelled to take a firmer stance on both, the core priority of preserving its loyalist base has pushed for the enactment of counter-measures. The empowerment of two non-royals Sunni, Adel bin Khalifa al-Fadhel and Tariq al-Hasan to two high-profile positions leading the National Security Agency and the Public Security Forces respectively, can be seen as an attempt to give more stake to other Sunni tribes in critical bodies of

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[457] Ibid.

[458] Justin Gengler, "Are Bahrain's Sunnis Still Awake?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 June 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=48650 (accessed 23 November 2018)

[459] Interview of the author with a researcher in the team of the Bassiouni report, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.

[460] Interview of the author with a Bahraini professor of Gulf politics, Skype, 11 February 2019

the state.[461] The hostilities towards Qatar are similarly explained by interviewees as strongly motivated by discouraging Qatar's alleged attempt to financially lure members of influential Sunni tribes, traditionally representing the core of the royal family's support base, into relocating to Doha and acquiring Qatari nationality.[462] Finally, according to a former MP affiliated to al-Wefaq, the regime after 2014 has looked towards the urban elites, predominantly Sunni but also Shi'a, as a possible new loyalist constituency, to play against rural, Islamist-leaning groups.[463]

Hoewever, this attempt by the government to re-define its loyalist base while strenghtening its traditional core, is not without challenges, that appear underestimated by the leadership. The long-standing political-identitarian struggle is certainly made more convoluted by a number of socio-economic vulnerabilities, largely fuelled by rising unemployment, scarce investment and inflation.[464] The combination of a stagnating economy with the sheer volume of young job-seekers entering the labour market every year is a real challenge. As foreign investors are hesitant to inject liquidity in the country, state finances are depleted by a combination of high expenses on security and political stability. A Shura member interviewed by the author in 2018 said: 'The 2011 revolts drained our budget. In 2014, while other GCC countries accumulated resources thanks to high oil prices, Bahrain couldn't. As prices crashed, we had to start borrowing massively and a vicious cycle between high interests and low oil prices was generated. As Shura we had to take unpopular decisions.' [465] While economic inequality might be especially evident in the Shi'a areas of the country, these challenges are not uniquely damaging to the Shi'a community. In fact several members of rural Sunni communities have at one point joined the protests against the status quo and have seen their economic opportunities decrease after

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[461] Interview of the author with a Bahrain-based senior researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Skype, 17 April 2019

[462] Interview of the author with a Bahrain-based senior researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Skype, 17 April 2019; Interview of the author with a Bahraini professor of Gulf politics, Skype, 11 February 2019; Interview of the author with a Bahraini diplomat, London, 29 May 2019.

[463] These remarks were part of a speech delivered by a former MP of al-Wefaq party in a closed-door roundtable held in London, 30 November 2018.

[464] Abdulrahman Al-Fawwaz "Foreign Direct Investment and Economic Stability: The case of Arab Peninsula." *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 5.8 (2018); Hanan Naser. "Financial Development and Economic Growth in Oil-Dependent Economy: The case of Bahrain." Dissertation, University of Munich, Germany, 2018.

[465] Interview of the author with a member of Bahrain's Consultative Council (Shura), London, 6 November 2018.

2011.[466] Hence, on one hand the spectre of a cross-sectarian, economically-motivated dissent as a potential risk cannot be completely disregarded. At the same time, containing the strains in the rural areas, might not be simple if those strains remain systemic. A former MP from al-Wefaq underlined how 'Bahrainis don't expect political liberties anymore, but they do expect good governance. The government believes they have time and the support of wealthy neighbours to address the economic challenges, but they might be underestimating the potential impacts of a new economic downturn on their loyalists in the urban elites'.[467] Relying on backing from regional partners, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait, might be effective in the short-term, but can hardly constitute an answer to structural economic dysfunctionalities, i.e. socio-economic vulnerabilities, in the long term. In addition to that, as seen with the intra-GCC crises, this reliance can reinforce fault lines in the domestic politics and those between socio-political communities and state authorities, as regional allies attempt to export their strategic and security blueprints into Bahrain. Ultimately, in fact, even strictly economic challenges call back into question state-society relations, which remain at the heart of Bahrain's security perceptions.

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[466] Interview of the author with a professor of Arab Gulf states' political economy, Doha, 15 December 2018.
[467] These remarks were part of a speech delivered by a former MP of al-Wefaq party in a closed-door roundtable held in London, 30 November 2018.

5.0 CHAPTER FIVE: SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia has been at the forefront of the two intra-GCC crises targeting Qatar in 2014 and 2017, vocally accusing Qatar of funding 'terrorist groups' - among them the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliates, openly supported by Qatar - and colluding with Iran and Iranian-backed militias to undermine the stability of the GCC.[468] However, determining whether these positions stem from actual security perceptions or rather from the Saudi-Qatari rivalry needs further examination. Relations between the two neighbours had already been marred by controversies and disagreements long before the two crises. Up until 1995, Qatar was ruled by Emir Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, whose approach to regional politics was markedly conciliatory towards the pre-eminence of Saudi Arabia, and aligned with Riyadh.[469] Already under Khalifa's rule, the influential Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa had been working to diversify Qatar's relations in order to create space for a foreign policy more independent from the Saudi Kingdom.[470] Hence, when Emir Hamad took over from his father in a bloodless coup in 1995, Qatar's neighbours were adamant that Khalifa be returned to his position, and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain allegedly even supported a counter-coup.[471] Once the counter-coup failed, Emir Hamad consolidated his position and doubled-down on devoting his efforts to disenfranchising Qatar from Riyadh's shadow. In 1996, a milestone in this project was the establishment of the global satellite network Al Jazeera. While Al Jazeera was founded primarily to boost the state's soft power, it was also a vehicle to undermine Saudi Arabia's regional leadership: the channel started hosting Saudi dissidents and putting into question Saudi policies to the point that Riyadh removed its Ambassador from Qatar in 2002 and for six years, as a way of pressuring Qatar.[472] This was the background against which the Arab Spring took place, deepening the divisions between Doha and Riyadh. Amid this charged context, it becomes paramount to question how much the initiatives against Qatar in 2014 and 2017 have been rooted in threat perceptions and how

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[468] Neil Quilliam "The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom's Position in the Gulf Crisis." in Krieg (ed.), *Divided Gulf*, pp. 109-126.

[469] David B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State* (London: Hurst & Co., 2016), pp. 18-22.

[470] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters*, p. 83.

[471] Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State*, p.21.

[472] "Examining Qatar-Saudi Relations," *RUSI* Newsbrief 32, no. 2 (March 2012)

much they were spurred by a Saudi-Qatari competition for influence in the region. In order to assess that, this chapter will begin by looking at the specific impacts of the Arab uprisings in Saudi Arabia, to explore how those influenced Saudi Arabia's perceptions of its own socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities and of the issues object of this thesis, and at the center of the intra-GCC crises. It will then proceed to examine those specific issues from Riyadh's point of view, attempting to draw a distinction between the regime's narrative about them and the related security perceptions as measured by the researcher, benchmarked against data and factual information. It will then be possible to draw conclusions about the evolution of the security calculus in Saudi Arabia after 2011, uncovering how, while the sensitivity in the security perceptions towards the issues here analysed is real, this is first and foremost spurred and fuelled by vulnerabilities of the Saudi state itself.

5.1 Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

Protests begun in the Shi'a-majority Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, connected to Bahrain via a 25-km bridge, just three days after large-scale protests started in Bahrain in February 2011.[473] Demonstrations happened in three areas specifically, 'Awamiyya, Qatif and al-Ahsa, encouraged, inspired and, at times, coordinated by Shi'a clerics such as the influential scholar Nimr al-Nimr, who rallied citizens through sermons openly linking regime legitimacy to political reforms.[474] On February 24, protests started in 'Awamiyya demanding the release of political prisoners, and in Qatif and Safwa, where protesters called for the release of nine 'forgotten' Shi'a prisoners, incarcerated sixteen years earlier for their alleged membership in Hezbollah al-Hijaz - an organization declaredly politically loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran - and involvement in the Khobar Towers bombing.[475] However, there were others in the Saudi Shi'a community whose priorities revolved even more around political reform and representation. In February 2011 a letter entitled "Declaration of National Reform" was signed by 119 activists from across the different socio-

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[473] For a full account of protests in the Eastern Province see: Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 628–59.
[474] Ibid., p. 635
[475] Ibid.

political communities, demanding the establishment of a federal system to give greater authority to local governments and of an elected parliament, "National Assembly", eyeing to the institution of a constitutional monarchy.[476] When one of those signatories, Shi'a cleric Tawfiq al-'Amir, was arrested in Al Ahsa, a new wave of more sustained protests begun.[477] In early March, a diverse range of youth protest groups coalesced into a movement called the Free Youth Coalition, behind demands ranging from 'the release of political prisoners, an end to corruption, the cancellation of all unjustified debts and taxes, the election of a consultative council, and the establishment of an independent judiciary'[478], and calling for a nation-wide "Day of Rage" on March 11. The prospect of nation-wide protests, coordinated by youth groups via online fora, which the authorities were only partially able to control, raised the level of concern for the regime.[479] In anticipation of the "Day of Rage", Saudi authorities released Tawfiq al-'Amir and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud met with some of the Shi'a leaders, promising financial packages worth USD 130bn to tackle youth unemployment and a rampant housing crisis, all in the attempt to convince them to withdraw support from the planned protests.[480] In the days leading up to March 11, authorities warned via newspapers that those who would go out and protest would face lashings and imprisonment.[481] Finally, when the day arrived, amid a large deployment of security forces, only a few dozen people took the streets, and only in al-Ahsa, Safwa, 'Awamiyya, and Qatif.[482]

Interestingly, it was Saudi Arabia's March 14 intervention via the Peninsula Shield Forces to support the Bahraini regime to trigger a new wave of demonstrations.

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[476] An English translation of the Declaration of National Reform is available at: A Call From Saudi Intellectuals to the Political Leadership, *Jadaliyya*, 28 February 2011, http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23744/A-Call-From-Saudi-Intellectuals-to-the-Political-Leadership (accessed 26 February 2019).

[477] "Saudi Arabia: Free Cleric Who Backs Change," *Human Rights Watch*, 28 February 2011, http://www.hrw.org/ news/2011/02/28/saudi-arabia-free-cleric-who-backs-change (accessed 26 February 2019).

[478] Frederic Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14 June 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/06/14/forgotten-uprising-in-eastern-saudi-arabia-pub-52093 (accessed 26 February 2019)

[479] Interview of the author with a senior Saudi analyst at a think tank close to the leadership, London, 7 May 2018.

[480] Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia".

[481] "Saudi Arabia show of force stifles 'day of rage' protests," *BBC Newsnight*, March 11, 2011, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9422550.stm, (accessed 26 February 2019)

[482] Ibid.

Between the 16th and 18th of March, thousands, especially from youth groups, protested in the Eastern Province in solidarity with Bahraini Shi'a, calling for the withdrawal of the Peninsula Shield from the country.[483] These messages were later gathered in a petition signed by 83 clerics from al-Ahsa.[484] Shows of solidarity included chanting 'free Bahrain' and 'one people, not two people', 'in an apparent reference to the unity of the Bahraini and Saudi (Eastern Province) people.'[485] Re-energised in their opposition by the cause of the Bahraini Shi'a, protesters continued to organize sporadic rallies in March and April 2011. Not even a declaration calling to halt protests signed by 35 more politically-conservative Shi'a clerics, and negotiated with the governor of Qatif Abdallah al-Uthman, managed to quell demonstrators.[486]

On the contrary, after a period of more sporadic rallies, due to limited concessions by the government, an incident in October 2011 in 'Awamiyya escalated the situation, as a gathering descended into an exchange of fire between the police and armed protesters, leaving a dozen wounded on both sides.[487] After this violent incident the Saudi Ministry of Interior released a statement accusing the protesters to be acting 'against the public peace at the behest of a foreign country seeking to undermine the security and stability of the homeland in blatant interference in national sovereignty' adding that 'those people have to clearly decide whether their loyalty is to Allah and their homeland or to that state and its authority.'[488] It was the first time Saudi authorities openly connected the demonstrators to a 'foreign country', i.e. Iran and, since the Autumn of 2011, the regime increasingly framed protesters as insurgents and foreign agents. On their part, protesters themselves started to openly question the legitimacy of their rulers in Riyadh: responding to the Ministry of Interior's statement, Nimr al-Nimr remarked in a sermon that 'We are not loyal to other countries or authorities, nor are we loyal to this country. What is this country? The regime that oppresses me?

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[483] "Saudi Arabia Demonstrators Hold Rallies in al-Qatif, Awwamiya," *Bloomberg*, 16 March 2011, http://www. bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-16/saudi-arabia-demonstrators-hold-rallies-in-al-qatif-awwamiya.html (accessed 26 February 2019)
[484] Matthiesen, , "A 'Saudi Spring?'", p. 637
[485] Ibid.
[486] Ibid., p. 642
[487] "Saudi police 'open fire on civilians' as protests gain momentum," *The Independent*, 5 October 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle- east/saudi-police-open- re-on-civilians-as-protests-gain-momentum-2365614.html. (accessed 26 February 2019)
[488] Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?'", p. 645

The regime that steals my money, sheds my blood, and violates my honor? What does a country mean? The regime? The ruling clan? The soil? I don't know what a country means. Loyalty is only to Allah! We have declared, and we reiterate, that our loyalty is to Allah, not the Saud clan'.[489] On November 23, the burial of two protesters killed by the police in earlier demonstrations brought 20.000 people to the streets of Qatif in the largest demonstration in the Eastern Province since the uprising of 1979.[490] Demonstrators chanted against the regime and even crossed the red line of attacking openly the ruling family by chanting 'death to al-Saud', as two more people were killed by the police.[491] The Grand Mufti 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, weighted in, arguing that Qatif protesters were a 'malicious group' with masters abroad who 'do not belong to this country.'[492] Tensions flared up again in early 2012, with the one-year anniversary of the uprising in Bahrain approaching on February 14, and erupted in violent clashes after the arrest of Nimr al-Nimr in July 2012, as some young activists shifted to attacking government buildings and police patrols with Molotov cocktails.[493] After two months of revamped clashes, in August 2012 seven more quietist religious leaders, representing the major Saudi Shi'a political currents, issued a new statement condemning any use of violence and affirming the unquestionable loyalty of the Shi'a community to the government of Saudi Arabia.[494] It was not the first time that Shi'a notables, judges or clerics had pleaded with the youth groups to halt the demonstrations, unsuccessfully. Once again, their statement encouraged a slow-down of demonstrations which, however, did not stop.

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[489] An English translation of the sermon is available at: "Saudi Ayatollah Nimr Al-Nimr Dares Saudi Regime to Attack Iran and Declares: We Are Loyal to Allah, Not to Saudi Arabia or its Royal Family", *MEMRI*, 17 October 2011, https://www.memri.org/reports/saudi-ayatollah-nimr-al-nimr-dares-saudi-regime-attack-iran-and-declares-we-are-loyal-allah (accessed 26 February 2019)

[490] Matthiesen, , "A 'Saudi Spring?'", p. 650

[491] Ibid.

[492] "Saudi grand mufti slams petition seeking terrorists' release," *Arab News*, 11 December 2011, http://www.arabnews.com/node/400772. (accessed 26 February 2019).

[493] "Bombs thrown near Saudi court in Shiite-populated east," *The Daily Star*, 15 July 2012, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=180693&mode=print; Glen Carey, "Saudi Security Forces Hurt by Gunmen in Oil-Rich Province", *Bloomberg*, 16 July 2012, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-07-14/saudi-security-forces-hurt-by-gunmen-in-oil-rich-province (accessed 26 February 2019)

[494] "Qatif scholars denounce violence," *Arab News*, 2 August 2012, www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/qatif-scholars-denounce-violence. (accessed 26 February 2019)

On the contrary, the summer of 2012 saw protests in another area of Saudi Arabia, the central region of Qassim.[495] Small groups of people started to organise sit-ins in front of government buildings, including prisons, Ministry of Interior facilities, the governorate's offices. Similarly to how it begun in the Eastern Province, their main demands were about the release of political prisoners. Between 2012 and 2013 tens of thousands of small demonstrations were held, especially in the conservative city of Buraydah. Recalling the language of the Arab Spring, demonstrators chanted 'The people want to free the prisons' or 'The people want the implementation of the law' in reference to legal processes considered unfair.[496] At times, local mismanagement and corruption, became additional focal points of demonstrations.[497] Prominent Islamist figures, un-affiliated with the official clergy and aligned with a Saudi organization close to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sahwa, started showing their support for people's grievances online. These included reformist cleric Salman al-'Awda who in March 2013 shared an open letter to the government in which he wrote: 'People here, like people around the world, have demands, longings and rights, and they will not remain silent forever when they are denied all or some of them. When one becomes hopeless, you can expect anything from them.'[498] To contain possible escalations, in Qassim the regime resorted to stepping up control and surveillance on the scarcely populated areas and to large-scale arrest campaigns.[499] While these protests were also significant, the ones in the Eastern Province were markedly predominant in the regime's perceptions, and not only because of their magnitude.

A key impact factor has been the historical and socio-political context in which the 2011 protests took place: the Eastern Province has been restive for decades, as Saudi Shi'a - estimated at between one and a half and two million people or around 10 percent of the citizen population - have long complained of systematic, structural discrimination in religious practice, government employment, and

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[495] These protests remain underexplored, but some information is available in: Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring", Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics and Political Science, May 2014.
[496] Ibid., p. 17
[497] Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia".
[498] The letter's passage is quoted in: Marc Lynch, "A Few Good Saudi Men" *Foreign Policy*, 17 May 2013.
[499] Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring".

business, and overall marginalization.[500] Under the Kingdom's 1992 Basic Law, Sunni Islam is enshrined as the source of authority for the state and for the law.[501] Religious edicts, *fatwas*, impacting all aspects of life in the Kingdom are issued by the Council of Senior Scholars, a council gathering high-profile religious scholars appointed by the King, which includes representatives of the Sunni Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafi schools, as well as Hanbalis, but no significant Shi'a representation.[502] Given the Council of Senior Scholars clerics' control over the religious life, education sector and the judiciary in Saudi Arabia, and their, discontinuous but meaningful, influence over politics, this exclusion has long translated into discrimination and marginalization in political, economic and social terms. Shi'a religiosity has been repressed though arbitrary mosque closures, the prohibition of public gatherings and rituals. The Saudi educational system, imbued with Wahhabi thought, long tolerated and, at times, promoted anti-Shi'ism. Shi'a lamented the unfairness of the judicial system, as Shi'a courts' jurisdiction has been traditionally limited both geographically, as they only operate as local courts in the Eastern Province, and thematically, as they only treat issues of family law. A lack of economic opportunities and viable employment options relegated many areas in the oil-rich Eastern Province to socio-economic underdevelopment. Shi'a have been underrepresented in or excluded from sensitive government agencies, such as the Ministry of Interior, the National Guard, and the Ministry of Defense, police forces, the Royal Court, cabinet, the diplomatic corp and governorates' institutions. These institutionalised, structural socio-economic inequality and socio-political marginalization fit the description of what has been termed in this thesis as vulnerabilities. These grievances have been lamented since the 1980s, when the local Shi'a communities, then inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution, revolted against the Sunni ruling family, leaving a long-lasting mark on the Saudi collective

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[500] For a comprehensive overview of the grievances of Saudi Shi'a see: "The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia," Middle East Report No. 45, *International Crisis Group*, 19 September 2005.

[501] Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban, eds. *Religion and politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the state.* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 2009.

[502] Susanne Olsson, "Shia as Internal Others: A Salafi Rejection of the 'Rejecters'", *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 28:4, 2017, pp. 409-430

memory.[503] The 2011 demonstrations, centred around the same issues, were the largest witnessed since then.

A similitude between the late 1970s and 2011, which had a strong impact on the regime's perceptions, was the connection between the Shi'a protests in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.[504] The cooperation and coordination between revolutionary oppositional groups active in both countries in the late 1970s, i.e. the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula in Saudi Arabia the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), in a way amplified their capabilities.[505] Thorough the decades, people-to-people links, based on family connections, creating the conditions for the existence of close-knit networks, were strengthened by the social policies at the GCC level. Fast forward to 2011, the umbrella group of the Saudi Shi'a youth, the Coalition for Freedom and Justice, including the more revolutionary elements among protesters, not only supported openly the Bahraini opposition, but showed clear similitudes with the tactics and discourse of the Bahraini February 14 Youth Coalition.[506] In both cases, the protesters showed no hesitation to question directly the legitimacy of the royal families and the state itself. A potential success of the uprising in Bahrain was perceived by the Saudi regime as a major boost for its own opposition, in a strong domino effect, and hence a threat for the Saudi regime's survival as well as its political influence on Bahrain.[507] An indication of the importance of Bahrain for Saudi Arabia's internal stability, is that the decision to send troops to Bahrain, under the Peninsula Shield umbrella, was spearheaded

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[503] Toby Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38 (2006), pp. 213–233.

[504] This connection was often reiterated by primary sources, including in an interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat held in London on 19 May 2018 and in a speech delivered by a Saudi scholar and Director of a Riyadh-based think tank with ties to the Saudi regime. in a closed-door roundtable held in London, 20 September 2018

[505] Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics*, pp. 139–143

[506] Wehrey, *Sectarian politics in the Gulf*.

[507] Interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat, London, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar focused on Saudi-Iran relations, London, 17 April 2019.

by the Minister of Interior Nayef Bin Abdelaziz al-Saud, and not by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs or Defense.[508]

Another important element in the regime's perceptions was that the Saudi groups recognised a symbolic leader, Nimr al-Nimr, a Shi'a cleric just like Ayatollah Khomeini before the Islamic Revolution, who openly questioned the foundational myth of the Kingdom and its constitutive elements.[509] Nimr al-Nimr had a long history of connections to Iran and outspoken criticism of the Saudi regime: already in the late 1970s he joined the transnational Shi'a movement led by Iraqi-Iranian cleric Mohammed Mahdi al-Shirazi, which was at the forefront of the 1980s protests in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.[510] In the aftermath of the uprisings, al-Nimr went into exile to Iran, where he subsequently became one of the key representatives in Saudi Arabia for the movement's revolutionary political leader, Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi.[511] Nimr's popularity soared during the 2009 incidents, when clashes broke out between pilgrims visiting Shi'a shrines and the Baqi cemetery in Medina and members of the regime's morality police.[512] In March of that year al-Nimr gave a fiery speech, dubbed "Dignity Speech", in which he lashed out at the regime and warned that the secession of the Eastern Province was the only meaningful solution for the Shi'a.[513] The connections between al-Nimr and Iran were never doubted by the regime, including in 2011.[514]

While the logistical or financial support, as well as the political coordination alleged by the Saudi regime between Iran and the protesters has not been proven, there were strong demonstrations of moral and media support from Iran. Protests in Saudi Arabia were widely covered by the Iranian-sponsored Arabic-language Al Alam channel, Lebanese Hezbollah's Al Manar, Iraq's Ahlul Bait

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[508] Jane Kinninmont, "Keeping it in the family", *Foreign Policy*, 3 November 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/03/keeping-it-in-the-family/, (accessed 26 February 2019)

[509] Toby Matthiesen, "The World's Most Misunderstood Martyr", *Foreign Policy*, 8 January 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/08/the-worlds-most-misunderstood-martyr/ (accessed 26 February 2019)

[510] Ibid.

[511] Ibid.

[512] Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia"

[513] Matthiesen, "The World's Most Misunderstood Martyr".

[514] Interview of the author with a Saudi official, London, 18 September 2018; Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar focused on Saudi-Iran relations, London, 17 April 2019.

TV.[515] Similarly, in the late 1970s, Iran had launched Arab-language radio programs, such as Radio Tehran, attacking the al-Saud rulers as a 'corrupt, mercenary agent of the United States' while broadcasting statements by the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula.[516] These displays of solidarity were largely instrumental for the Saudi regime to confirm the external influence over the protest movements, and embrace the rhetoric of Iran's interference in the domestic affairs both of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as part of the Iran Revolutionary Guards' mission to export the Khomeinist revolution in the region.[517]

Many have argued that this framing has been employed by the state to de-legitimize the protesters' legitimate grievances and to strengthen the loyalty of the Sunni majority to the regime, by scaring them of an Iranian takeover of the Eastern Province's oilfields with the help of local Shi'a.[518] However, interviews with prominent Saudi political commentators, have argued that, from the point of view of the Saudi authorities, while Saudi Shi'a communities may have legitimate grievances, Iran's agenda to exploit such grievances to cause instability and extend its influence in Saudi Arabia is not in question.[519] This concentration of factors, and the fact that the events of 2011 brought once again to the surface structural socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities in the marginalised communities of the Eastern Province, arguably explains why the local chapter of the Arab Spring would influence the Saudi regime's security perceptions well beyond the year 2011.

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[515] Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?'", p. 633

[516] Joseph A. Kechichian "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Containing the Iranian Revolution." *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 13.1 (1989).

[517] Abdulkhaleq Abdullah. "Ar-rabi'a al arabi: wijhat nazar min al khalij al arabi" (The Arab Spring: A point of view from the Arabian Gulf), *Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi* no. 391, September 2011, pp. 117-128; Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia vs the Arab Spring", *Project Syndicate*, 16 August 2011, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/saudi-arabia-vs--the-arab-spring (accessed 26 February 2019).

[518] See for instance: Madawi Al-Rasheed "Sectarianism as counter-revolution: Saudi responses to the Arab Spring." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11.3 (2011): 513-526; Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?'", p. 658

[519] Interview of the author with a senior Saudi analyst at a think tank close to the leadership, London, 7 May 2018; Interview of the author with a Saudi journalist, London, 8 April 2019.

5.2 Saudi Arabia and the 'Shi'a threat'.

There is an abundance of public and private statements from Saudi officials identifying Iran as a major threat to the Arab world and the Saudi Kingdom, especially after 2011.[520] However, the characterizations of such threat by Saudi officials have been divergent and even contradictory: what is, exactly, that Iran threatens? In a 2014 study, Nawaf Obaid, a long time special counsellor to Saudi ambassadors and the Royal Court, wrote that 'Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as the main threat to regional stability', with a reference to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and a special attention to the conflict Yemen, treated separately in the section dedicated to defending the 'homeland'.[521] In a closed-door event held in London in 2018, a Saudi scholar and Director of a Riyadh-based think tank with ties to the Saudi regime argued that 'Iran is a theocratic system with aspirations over the leadership of the Muslim world. The system is led by the IRGC and the Supreme Leader, while governments are relatively inconsequential. The Supreme Leader is stuck in what he considers an existential fight with the Saudi monarchy'.[522] In 2016, Prince Sultan Bin Khalid Al-Faisal al-Saud, former Commander of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces Counter-Insurgency Special Operations Task Force, wrote that 'serious risks and threats as a result of the pervasive and corrosive influence of Iran in our region - and in particular on Saudi Arabia - amount to a conventional threat and present a clear danger to our national security. (…) This increasing Iranian incursion into other states' affairs directly threatens our own national security'.[523] In 2015 then-Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir wrote that 'Iran is the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region'.[524] In 2018 Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman remarked in an interview that

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[520] See for example Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubair, "Can Iran Change?", *The New York Times*, 19 January 2016; Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubair, "The Saudis Are Fighting Terrorism, Don't Believe Otherwise", *Newsweek*, 3 February 2016; Ali Shihabi, "Why Saudi Arabia mistrusts Iran?", *Al-Arabiya*, 5 October 2016; See for example "Interview with HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud" in David DesRoches, (ed.) "GCC Security Amid Regional Crises", *Gulf Affairs*, OXGAPS, Spring 2016, p. 50.

[521] Nawaf Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine", Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, May 2014, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/Saudi%20Strategic%20Doctrine%20-%20web.pdf (accessed 13 March 2019)

[522] These remarks were part a speech delivered by a Saudi scholar and Director of a Riyadh-based think tank with ties to the Saudi regime in a closed-door roundtable held in London, 20 September 2018

[523] Sultan Bin Khalid Al-Faisal, "Clear and Present Danger" in DesRoches, (ed.) "GCC Security Amid Regional Crises", p. 24

[524] Ahmed al-Jubair, "Can Iran Change?", *The New York Times*, 19 January 2016

'Iranians, they're the cause of problems in the Middle East, but they are not a big threat to Saudi Arabia. But if you don't watch it, it could turn into a threat.'[525] These perspectives show an oscillation between perceiving Iran as an external threat, damaging the regional interests of Saudi Arabia and an internal threat, intent on destabilising the Kingdom from within. Both views have long co-existed, although more emphasis has been historically put on the external category of the threat, described 'both in terms of balance of power and as a transnational ideological threat', as noted by scholar Gregory Gause.[526]

Several interviewees recalled to the author how the Islamic Revolution's leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wrote and spoke with deep-seated hostility about Saudi Arabia, defining the Saudis in his testament as 'traitors to the two holy shrines', 'inept and spineless leaders' and 'not worthy of being in charge of the hajj and Kaaba affairs'.[527] This was going to remain a key theme in the bilateral relations and a cause of extreme concern for the Saudi rulers, who view their guardianship of the holy places as an integral part of their legitimacy mix and national identity.[528] In Riyadh, Khomeini's rhetoric is, still today, considered fundamental in shaping the ideology of Iran's clerical class which is, in turn, regarded to hold more political power than elected governments.[529] Such ideological hostility is often described in Saudi strategic discourse as the fuel to export the Khomeinist revolution and expand Iran's geopolitical clout wherever there is an opportunity. For instance, Ali Shihabi - Director of the think tank Arabia Foundation and a Saudi watcher close to the leadership - wrote: 'Since 1979, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has seen itself as facing a radical, militaristic and expansionist Iran that leverages Shi'a disenfranchisement, local power vacuums

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[525] "Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Talks to TIME About the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's Plans and President Trump", *TIME*, 5 April 2018, http://time.com/5228006/mohammed-bin-salman-interview-transcript-full/ (accessed 13 March 2019)

[526] Gregory Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East State*s, 2nd ed., Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner), 2014, p. 191

[527] "Excerpts from Khomeini speeches", *The New York Times*, 4 August 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/04/world/excerpts-from-khomeini-speeches.html (accessed 13 March 2019)

[528] Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and politics in Saudi Arabia.*

[529] This point has emerged routinely in the author's interviews, including with a Saudi official (London, 18 September 2018), with a Saudi journalist (London, 8 April 2019), with a with a Doha-based professor of Gulf studies (Doha, 15 December 2018) and with an American expert on GCC affairs (Skype, 3 May 2019).

and a vast and growing network of well-armed and well-trained proxies to export its Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East.'[530]

Generally speaking, the impact of historical events surrounding Iran's Islamic Revolution on Saudi collective memory and its leadership's perceptions, has routinely been highlighted in interviews conducted by the author.[531] This is connected to the fact that in the 1980s the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps established the Office of Liberation Movements with the explicit purpose of supporting revolutionary groups in the Gulf, including the Organization of the Islamic Revolution and Hezbollah al-Hijaz.[532] The Organization of the Islamic Revolution was established in 1979 by Shi'a clerics - such as Hassan al-Saffar, Tawfiq al-Saif, Jafar al-Shayeb - in the aftermath of a short-lived uprising, violently crashed by the Saudi National Guard, which had spread in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province to protest poor living conditions and religious discrimination.[533] In 1987, a more militant group was formed under the name Hezbollah al-Hijaz: receiving training by the IRGC and Hezbollah in Lebanon, it vowed to violently overthrow the Saudi rulers and establish an Islamic Republic after the Iranian model.[534] In the following two years, the group was involved in bombing attacks on oil facilities in the Eastern Province, including at Ra's al Ju'aymah, Jubayl, Ra's Tanura, and in targeted assassinations of Saudi security officials pursuing members of the organizations abroad.[535] Back in the 1980s, as mentioned, Tehran also hosted the International Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, which orchestrated an insurgency attempt in Manama.[536] Iran's ambitions towards Bahrain had already been at the center of the Iran-Saudi rivalry after Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf, and yet the two sides had managed to agree to a sovereign Bahrain, as Saudi officials made clear to the Shah that any military

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[530] Ali Shihabi, "The Iranian Threat: The Saudi Perspective", London School of Economics and Political Science blog, 15 June 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/15/the-iranian-threat-the-saudi-perspective/ (accessed 13 March 2019)
[531] Interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat, London, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with a senior Saudi analyst at a think tank close to the leadership, London, 7 May 2018; Interview of the author with a young Saudi scholar researching Saudi foreign policy, London, 3 December 2018.
[532] Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics*, p. 179.
[533] Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery".
[534] Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group", *The Middle East Journal* 64.2 (2010): pp. 179-197.
[535] Ibid., p. 185.
[536] Alhasan, "The role of Iran in the failed coup of 1981".

move against Bahrain would be considered a direct act of aggression against Saudi Arabia.[537]

When Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the death of Khomeini created the conditions for a partial *rapprochement* between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two major militant groups turned to focusing more on propaganda than political violence.[538] Some leaders in the Organization for the Islamic Revolution, including Shirazi cleric Hassan al-Saffar received an amnesty by the Saudi regime in exchange for the abandonment of political activities.[539] Other more hardline clerics, such as Nimr al-Nimr, rejected the offer. Perhaps also in response to this agreement, in 1996 the Khobar Towers in the Eastern Province were bombed, killing 19 US soldiers and wounding 500 people: while Hezbollah al-Hijaz never claimed responsibility for the attack, the Saudi regime has long blamed the organization, launching a large-scale crackdown and effectively crippling it.[540] From the 1990s onwards, Shi'a clerics resorted to non-violent activism including: petitions to the royal family, grassroots civil society work, participation in municipal council elections, and dialogue with like-minded reformists among liberals and Sunni Islamists.[541] Still, the government would continue to raise questions about their loyalty and connections to Tehran.[542] Many reformist hopes were encouraged by the accession to the throne of King Abdullah in 2005, a royal who had long sponsored initiatives aimed at tempering sectarian divisions, such as the establishment of the National Dialogue, providing limited representation to the community.[543] Anyways, as practical outcomes from the National Dialogue lagged, the afore-mentioned 2009 incident in Medina, when Shi'a pilgrims clashed with the morality police, turned frustration into outright animosity against the regime.[544]

The Saudi authorities reacted to the Medina incident, as recorded by the US State Department's Annual Report to Congress on International Religious Freedom in 2010, with arbitrary detentions, mosque closures, the prohibition of public display

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[537] Faisal bin Salman al-Saud, *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition 1968–1971* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), p. 32.
[538] Ibid., p. 188
[539] Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shiʿis of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books), 2006, pp. 140–77.
[540] Ibid.
[541] Wehrey, *Sectarian politics in the Gulf*, p. 106
[542] Ibid.
[543] Mark Thompson. *Saudi Arabia and the path to political change: National dialogue and civil society*. (London: IB Tauris), 2014.
[544] Wehrey, *Sectarian politics in the Gulf*, p. 109.

of Shi'a rituals and gatherings, and restrictive measures on the community.[545] These measures were inflammatory, as they hit at the heart of the central grievance for Saudi Shi'a: religious discrimination. A diplomatic cable from the US consulate in Dhahran dated November 2010, highlighted the mounting frustration, 'turning to hopelessness and exasperation' in the Shi'a communities of the East.[546] The spark of the Arab Spring was sufficient to fully ignite the protests. The Saudi regime saw the 2011 Shi'a uprisings in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as a re-ignition of the pre-1990s past.[547] While Iran's direct involvement in the uprisings remains, as mentioned, to be proven, to a certain extent protesters also saw these events in continuity with their past, given how the grievances lamented had not significantly changed over the decades.[548] These grievances could be leveraged by Iran, presenting itself as the patron of disgruntled Shi'a minorities in the Arab world.[549] From the Saudi point of view Iran has employed this rhetoric to expand political influence in the Arab world.

A Saudi analyst has described this strategy as having been replicated multiple times throughout the region following a simple model: the establishment of proxy militias and political factions, indoctrinated in Khomeinism, weakening the state from within.[550] Cited as the most successful instances are Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hasd al-Shabi (or Popular Mobilization Units, PMU) and political factions such as Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Islamic Dawa Party, in post-Saddam Iraq.[551] Indeed the extension of Iranian influence into the power vacuum created in post-2003 Iraq, when the US forces defeated Saddam Hussein's regime and disbanded the Sunni-controlled state in de-ba'athification,

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[545] "2010 Report on International Religious Freedom: Saudi Arabia", US Department of State, 2010, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/ (accessed 13 March 2019).

[546] "Eastern Province Shia frustrated", diplomatic cable, US Consulate in Dhahran, *Wikileaks*, 1 November 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DHAHRAN266_a.html (accessed 13 March 2019)

[547] A former Saudi diplomat interviewed by the author in London on 19 May 2018 said 'It was as if the reconciliation and the National Dialogues had never even taken place. It was as if we went back to the 1980s'. The latter idea was stated also by a prominent Saudi scholar focused on Saudi-Iran relations interviewed by the author in London on 17 April 2019.

[548] For a comprehensive overview of the grievances of Saudi Shi'a see: "The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia," Middle East Report No. 45, *International Crisis Group*, 19 September 2005.

[549] Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran" in Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, (eds) *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, pp. 283-309

[550] Interview of the author with a senior Saudi analyst at a think tank close to the leadership, London, 7 May 2018.

[551] Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran".

is often referred to as a pivotal moment in magnifying the 'Iranian threat' and reinforcing the myth of a Shi'a transnational polity in the making.[552] King Abdullah of Jordan then famously described this geopolitical belt connecting Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran under the Iranian influence as a Shi'a 'crescent'.[553] Thus it was certainly perceived in Riyadh, where the Syrian revolution in 2011 was initially seen as a potential opportunity to dislodge Iranian influence in Damascus, thus breaking the crescent, and replace it with Sunni forces who had pledged to pivot away from Tehran if victorious.[554] Similarly, in 2017, under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has exerted pressures on Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri, leader of the Saudi-aligned Sunni formation Future Movement, to resign in protest of Iranian influence over Beirut, and has offered support to Iraqi political factions, including Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in exchange for their taking the distance from Tehran.[555]

Seen from Riyadh the crescent had long resembled as a 'full moon', as described by a confidant of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2016, when taking in consideration perceived Iran's ambitions in Yemen.[556] Already around 2003, the Shia-aligned Zaydi rebel group known as Houthis had launched an insurgency against the Yemeni government, and several policy-makers in the Arabian Peninsula alleged that they were encouraged and aided by Iran with arms and military instructors in their struggle.[557] The following year, in 2008, Qatar

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[552] Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*, p. 139.

[553] "Jordan's Abdullah concerned Iraq may tilt toward Iran", *MSNBC*, 8 December 2004, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6679939/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/jordans-abdullah-concerned-iraq-may-tilt-toward-tehran/#.XIfWb8_7S9a (accessed 12 March 2019).

[554] Hassan Hassan, "Syria: the view from the Gulf states", *European Council On Foreign Relations*, 13 June 2013, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_syria_the_view_from_the_gulf_states135 (accessed 26 February 2019); Jay Solomon and Nour Malas, "Syria Would Cut Iran Military Tie, Opposition Head Says" *Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2011, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204397704577070850124861954, (accessed 26 February 2019)

[555] "Saudi Arabia forcibly detained Lebanon's prime minister, sources say", *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/saudi-arabia-forcibly-detained-lebanons-prime-minister-sources-say/2017/11/10/b93a1fb4-c647-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512_story.html?utm_term=.f9c537e23e33 (accessed 13 March 2019); "Iraqi Shi'ite leader Sadr makes rare visit to Saudi Arabia", *Reuters*, 30 July 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iraq-cleric/iraqi-shiite-leader-sadr-makes-rare-visit-to-saudi-arabia-idUSKBN1AF0UN (accessed 13 March 2019)

[556] "Young prince in a hurry", *The Economist*, 9 January 2016.

[557] "Yemenis intercept 'Iranian ship'", *BBC*, 27 October 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8327892.stm (accessed 12 July 2018)

negotiated a peace agreement pledging US$300–500 million in reconstruction assistance for the Northern Yemeni province of Saada, where the Houthis reside.[558] Shortly after the accords were signed, fighting resumed and Saudi Arabia entered the fray, declaring war on the Houthis. A prominent role was then played by the then-Minister of Interior, Nayef bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, and his son and deputy, Mohammad bin Nayef al-Saud showing that, as a Saudi analyst put it in 2011, 'Yemen is not about foreign policy, it's about national security'.[559] Ultimately, the Kingdom agreed to an unsatisfactory truce after the Houthis resisted months of Saudi airstrikes and land incursions, and infiltrated to the Saudi side of the border.[560] When a Houthi insurgency revamped after street protests toppled the Yemeni regime in 2011, the group conquered large sways of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa, in 2014. Then Alireza Zakani, a confidant of the Supreme Leader, boasted that 'three Arab capitals [Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad] have already fallen into Iran's hands and belong to the Iranian Islamic Revolution, and Sana'a is the fourth'.[561] The following year Saudi Arabia launched a new military offensive, with UAE backing, to counter the Houthi advance amid mounting allegations of Iranian support.[562] According to Nawaf Obaid, the Houthis, 'are looking to expand their regional presence with access to the Red Sea and represent a serious strategic as well as physical threat'.[563] According to Ali Shihabi, 'equipped with Iranian arms and trained by Hezbollah' the Houthis would quickly 'transform into a new Hezbollah on the Kingdom's southern border', something which was considered intolerable and had to be pre-empted.[564]

The Iran deal, or JCPOA, was seen through the lenses of this perceived regional expansion by Iran. From a Saudi perspective, by lifting comprehensive economic sanctions, the agreement provided Iran with more economic resources to be re-

[558] "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb." Middle East Report No. 86, *International Crisis Group*, 27 May 2009.

[559] Saudi analyst quoted in Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, "Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy", Briefing Paper, MENAP BP 2011/01, *Chatham House*, May 2011, p. 9.

[560] Lucas Winter, "Riyadh Enters the Yemen–Huthi Fray", *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1, Winter 2012

[561] Quoted in Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai. "Yemen: an Opportunity for Iran–Saudi Dialogue?." *The Washington Quarterly* 39.2 (2016): p. 158.

[562] Thomas Juneau. "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment." *International Affairs* 92.3 (2016): 647-663.

[563] Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine", p. 15.

[564] Shihabi, "The Iranian Threat: The Saudi Perspective".

invested in its regional proxies.[565] For this reason, Saudi officials such as Turki al-Faisal voiced concerns that regional dossiers had not been discussed in the framework of the negotiations, and that GCC states had not been invited at the negotiating table.[566] The widespread perception was that global powers - first and foremost the United States – had ignored GCC concerns, driven by the objective of re-creating the 1970s twin pillar policy relaying on both Iran and Saudi Arabia as the two regional powers to secure the Gulf, and thus creating an equilibrium that would allow the fatigued United States to retrench from the decades-long role of security guarantor.[567] To respond to this perception, Saudi Arabia increasingly took the mission to counter Iran in its hands.[568] At the geopolitical level, as previously explored, Saudi Arabia assumed a more prominent role in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Domestically, Saudi Arabia decided to hand exemplary punishment to those identified by the regime as leaders of the Saudi Shi'a revolts and, in January 2016, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was executed for terrorism.[569] In response, Iranian mobs stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the general consulate in the city of Mashhad: blaming Iranian authorities of failure in protecting its diplomatic premises, Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Iran. Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir commented the decision stating: 'In addition to these acts of aggression, the Iranian regime is smuggling weapons and explosives and planting terrorist cells in the region, including the Kingdom, to spread turmoil'.[570] In fact, in the home town of Nimr al-Nimr, 'Awamiyya, fighting between the security forces and small militant groups had never fully stopped. In the summer of 2017, just as Mohammad bin Salman became Crown Prince, the Saudi authorities launched an operation to reclaim the town's control through the iron fist: in a statement dated August 2017 a

[565] David Schenker, "The Shift in Saudi Foreign Policy", Policy Analysis, *The Washington Institute*, 10 February 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shift-in-saudi-foreign-policy (accessed 13 March 2019)

[566] Steven Erlanger, "Saudi Prince Criticizes Obama Administration, Citing Indecision in Mideast", *The New York Times*, 15 December 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/16/world/middleeast/saudi-prince-accuses-obama-of-indecision-on-middle-east (accessed 13 March 2019)

[567] Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, pp.16-25.

[568] Gause. "Beyond sectarianism", pp. 1-27.

[569] "Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia executes top Shia cleric", *BBC*, 2 January 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35213244 (accessed 13 March 2019)

[570] "Foreign Minister announcement severing ties with Iran", website of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Washington D.C., 3 January 2016, https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/foreign-minister-announcement-severing-ties-iran (accessed 14 March 2019)

government's spokesman put it as follows: 'Due to its narrow streets, the al-Musawara neighbourhood [in 'Awamiyya] became a haven for terrorists and suspicious activities ranging from terrorism and kidnapping to selling drugs and weapons.'[571]

When analysed through the theoretical framework of this thesis, the Saudi regime's perceptions of Iran and the 'Shi'a threat' after 2011, can be described in their complexity. That emanating from Iran and Shi'a aligned groups is certainly perceived as a full-fledged threat, having the intent and capabilities to damage the functional integrity of the Saudi borders and of its institutions, as much as its political stability and monarchical identity. It is also perceived as a quintessential intermestic threat, originating from abroad but having developed a strong internal dimension, threatening the regional interests of the Saudi regime as much as its internal priorities. Other than a clear political dimension, this threat is perceived in its, asymmetric, military dimension. An economic dimension has been raised by two of the interviewees, who highlighted how Iran's return to the global energy market means direct completion for Saudi Arabia, or how Iran's ambitions on the oil resources of the Eastern Province are an integral part of its predatory plans for the Arabian Peninsula.[572] Interestingly, however, the societal dimension of this threat, i.e. the potential for sectarian-flavored disruptions to the Saudi national fabric to deepen, has been only marginally raised.

5.3 Saudi Arabia and the 'Islamist threat'.

The Saudi regime's perception of the Muslim Brotherhood varied greatly over the decades and as a function of both domestic and regional dynamics, with regime-Brotherhood relations going from accommodation to competition, and through cycles of conflict and reconciliation.[573] These oscillations, it is here argued, mirror

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[571] "Inside the Saudi town that's been under siege for three months by its own government", *The Independent*, 4 August 2017.
[572] Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar focused on Saudi-Iran relations, London, 17 April 2019; Interview of the author with a Saudi official, London, 18 September 2018. This point was also raised in a closed-door event held in London on 20 September 2018 by a Saudi scholar and Director of a Riyadh-based think tank with ties to the Saudi regime.
[573] Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2011.

closely the Saudi leadership's perceptions of the group in its internal, external or intermestic levels.

Similarly to other GCC countries, the Brotherhood arrived in the Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s, introduced by thousands of members fleeing persecution at the hands of Arab nationalist regimes in Syria, Egypt, and beyond.[574] In the Kingdom they joined together in an informally structured movement self-named Islamic Awakening (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) or Sahwa, which over time became heavily contaminated by local Wahhabi tradition. Members of the Brotherhood affiliated to the Sahwa were initially useful to the regime to counter the ideological threat coming from Arab socialism and nationalism, inspired by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and developed in the context of the Cold War, at the domestic level.[575] To this end, they developed cooperative relations also with the Wahhabi clerical establishment, whose revivalist ideology had been since the 19th century a key ingredient of the national identity mix for the nascent Kingdom and a key vehicle of legitimization for its ruling family.[576] In fact, representatives of Saudi religious institutions enabled Sahwa members to access the education system, the media, and organizations engaged in social activities such as camps or charities, with their anti-Nasserism messages.[577] Cooperation between the state and the Sahwa continued until the fall of the Soviet Union and related revolutionary Arab movements in early 1990s left Islamists to seem the only organized group with the capacity to challenge the regime.[578]

The deployment of American troops on Saudi soil, engaged against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991, provided the context for a turning point in the relations between the Sahwa and the Saudi regime.[579] Sahwa members were critical of both the presence of foreign troops on holy Muslim soil and, more generally, the regime's alliance with the United States.[580] They launched nation-wide petitions and engaged in mobilization across various Saudi regions. The regime reacted

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[574] Ibid., p. 38
[575] Ibid., p. 39
[576] Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and politics in Saudi Arabia*.
[577] R. Hrair Dekmejian, "The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 627-643
[578] Interview of the author with a member of the team of a Council of Senior Scholars' Ulema, London, 14 August 2018; Interview of the author with a European diplomat previously posted in Riyadh, London, 18 January 2019.
[579] Ibid.
[580] Dekmejian, "The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia", p. 631.

through mass arrests and a repression campaign between 1994 and 1995, effectively driving the movement to silence and underground residual activities.[581] This 'Sahwa insurrection' highlighted the main difference between the movement, which clung on political elements and other, non-politicized forms of religiosity, for example the quietist Salafis, Wahhabis, Madkhalists.[582] When released from prison in the late 1990s, some of the Sahwa leaders such as Abdallah al-Hamid and Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim engaged again in discourses of political reform.[583] Establishing an unprecedented coalition with liberals and Shi'as, they produced petitions and documents in the 2000s calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.[584] While then-Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud tried to engage with the coalition members, then-Interior Minister, Prince Nayif bin Abdulaziz, who identified the Brotherhood as the 'source of all evil in the Kingdom', spearheaded a tough response and new arrest campaigns.[585] At the same time, the regime enlisted some other Sahwa clerics in the ideological fight against al-Qa'ida, who had launched a bombing campaign in the Kingdom in the early 2000s. Employing the clerics to undermine al-Qa'ida's recruitment efforts was an effective strategy, given their large traction in the Kingdom.[586] The movement's capability to mobilize became apparent in the first municipal elections of the Kingdom's modern history in 2005, when Sahwa-backed candidates won with very high percentages in most districts.[587]

It was in this context that the Arab Spring took place, putting the Sahwa in a potential new collision course with the regime. However, in fact, only a few Sahwa figures openly supported calls for reform at the domestic level while most refused to back mobilizations.[588] The most significant act of support for reformists by a number of 'constitutionalist' Sahwa clerics was arguably their signature of the February 2011 petition "Toward a State of Rights and Institutions", signed by

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[581] Ibid., p. 642.
[582] See for instance Jon Alterman and William Mccants "Saudi Arabia: Islamists Rising and Falling." In Jon Alterman (ed), *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*, (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield), 2015
[583] Ibid., p. 153.
[584] Stéphane Lacroix, "Is Saudi Arabia Immune?" *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4, October 2011, pp. 48–59.
[585] Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*.
[586] Lacroix, "Is Saudi Arabia Immune?", p. 53
[587] Hendrik Jan Kraetzschmar, "Electoral rules, voter mobilization and the Islamist landslide in the Saudi municipal elections of 2005", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 3:4, 2010, pp. 515-533.
[588] Stéphane Lacroix, "Is Saudi Arabia Immune?"

some liberals and Shi'a clerics as well.[589] However, a week later, some of the most prominent Sahwa figures, including Nasir al-'Umar and Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, publicly condemned political demonstrations as a sign of degeneration towards Westernization and disloyalty to the Kingdom.[590] According to a Saudi scholar interviewed by the author in 2019, this 'reluctance to grow into a full-fledged opposition force is embedded into the fibres of the Sahwa movement, whose members have for years been co-opted by the regime and been embedded into the state, leveraging its resources to grow in power and influence.'[591] An exception was represented by one of the most popular of Sahwa clerics, Salman al-Awda, who not only signed the petitions calling for political reforms, but also endorsed the Arab Spring in the region in a book and his aforementioned 2013 letter to the government, reiterating the need to reform or face public anger.[592]

Alongside al-Awda, several Sahwa figures openly supported the revolutions in North Africa, as well as in Syria and Yemen, and welcomed the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Egypt, while denouncing the Saudi regime's counter-revolutionary policies.[593] In particular, a petition was circulated on social media with hashtags such *as al-malik la yomathilani* (the King does not represent me), heavily criticising the Saudi financial and political support for Egyptian General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.[594] Sahwa clerics also joined the social media campaign showing the four finger gesture, symbolizing solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood supporters massacred on "Rabaa al-Adawiya" square by the Egyptian military in August 2013.[595] However, the regime did not step back from its anti-Brotherhood policies and, on the contrary, designated the Muslim

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[589] Ibid., p. 50.

[590] Ibid.

[591] Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar based in North America, Skype, 12 April 2019

[592] Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Salman al-Awdah: In the Shadow of Revolutions", *Jadaliyya*, 27 April 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11412/salman-al-awdah_in-the-shadow-ofrevolutions (accessed 21 May 2019)

[593] Marc Lynch, "Gulf Islamist Dissent over Egypt", *Foreign Policy*, 18 August 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/18/gulf-islamist-dissent-over-egypt/ (accessed 5 March 2019)

[594] Madawi al-Rasheed, "From Cooperation to Collision: Saudi Arabia and its Islamists" *Sharq Forum,* 17 November 2017, https://www.sharqforum.org/2017/11/17/from-cooperation-to-collision-saudi-arabia-and-its-islamists/ (accessed 4 March 2019)

[595] Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring", p. 25.

Brotherhood, but not the Sahwa, as a terrorist organization in March 2014 alongside Daesh and al-Qa'ida, criminalizing all shows of support for it.[596] According to a Saudi scholar researching Saudi foreign policy, this was a clear sign of how the regime at that time perceived the Brotherhood as a threat to its external, regional, interests.[597]

On the other hand, there were convergences between Sahwa clerics and other regime policies, especially as regional politics underwent a sectarian polarization. Both supported the crackdown against the opposition in Bahrain and both supported the Syrian opposition, as a few Sahwa clerics even organised fundraising campaigns for opposition groups in Syria and encouraged Saudis to travel and fight.[598] Additionally, Sahwa figures who had been critical of Saudi policies in Egypt, overwhelmingly supported operations initiated by the new King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his son, then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, against the Houthi rebels, since they took over Yemen's capital Sanaa in September 2014. Salman al-Awda strongly justified, in religious terms, the Saudi intervention in Yemen to counter Iran in public interviews, on his personal website "Islam Online" and to his millions of followers on social media.[599] Prominent preachers Muhammad al-Arifi and Awad al-Qarni also publicly praised the King for fighting Iran and Iranian-backed forces in Yemen, whom they identified with derogatory terms referring to ethno-historical rivalry - such as 'Safawid', referring to the Safavid Empire - religious rivalry - such as 'Majus' (Zoroastrians) - and sectarian rivalry - such as 'Rawafid' (Rejectionist, a derogatory term to indicate Shi'a).[600] The 'Iranian threat' in all of its dimensions was thus successfully employed by the regime to silence Islamist dissent and

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[596] "Saudi Arabia designates Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group." *Reuters*, 7 March 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-idUSBREA260SM20140307 (accessed 5 March 2019)
[597] Interview of the author with a young Saudi scholar researching Saudi foreign policy, London, 3 December 2018. This point is also made in: Darwich. "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2016.
[598] Raihan Ismail. "The Saudi 'ulama and the Syrian Civil War." in Amin Saikal (ed), *The Arab World and Iran.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2016, pp. 83-102.
[599] See an interview with Salman al-Awda on *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, 30 March 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R5K4eNV_ww#t=38; Al-Awda's thoughts on Operation Decisive Storm can be found on his website *Islam Online* in Arabic: http://www.islamtoday.net/files/DecisiveStorm
[600] See various quotes in Angus McDowall, "Yemen strikes boost Saudi nationalism and sectarianism," *Reuters*, 10 April 2014, http://in.mobile.reuters.com/article/idINL6N0WX4U720150410?irpc=932. (accessed 4 March 2019)

strengthen Sunni unity around the regime itself against a common external menace, similarly to what happened during the Nasser era. Amid this background, contemporarily to the launch of the Yemeni operations, Saudi Arabia's then-Foreign Minister Saud bin Faysal stated that his government had 'no problem with the Muslim Brotherhood.'[601]

However, this period of non-confrontation lasted only briefly. In his bid to power, then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman launched his all-encompassing vision for Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030*, in April 2016. A central element was a top-down modernization of the country's economy away from dependence on energy revenues.[602] Equally central was a social liberalization programme which included, in the course of the following two years, the introduction of cinemas, music and entertaining events, the clampdown of the religious and morality police - the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice or *muṭṭawwiʿa* - and, finally, the end of the ban for women to drive.[603] As Mohammad bin Salman officially became Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince in June 2017, social liberalization initiatives accelerated and, in parallel, a new crackdown on Sahwa clerics was launched. The crisis with Qatar, erupted in the same month, provided the context to arrest these clerics accusing them of being agents of Qatar, a long-time supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood.[604] In September 2017, the Crown Prince signed the first round of arrests for twenty clerics and religious scholars, including Salman al-Awda and Awad al-Qarni and, a year later, state prosecutors asked the death penalty for both.[605] Interestingly, Mohammad al-Arifi, who publicly backed some of the Prince's reforms and especially his stance towards Qatar, was not imprisoned. Mohammad bin Salman's social reforms should be viewed as a way to engage with the

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[601] Quoted in "Saudi Arabia Has 'No problem' with Muslim Brotherhood: Foreign Minister," *Middle East Eye*, 11 February 2015, http://www.middleeasteye. net/news/saudi-foreign-minister-no-problem-muslimbrotherhood-230201904. (accessed 4 March 2019)

[602] See the full text of *Vision2030* at http://vision2030.gov.sa/en

[603] The connection between social liberalization, the crackdown against Sahwa clerics and the narrative against Qatar is developed in: Quilliam "The Saudi Dimension".

[604] Ibid.

[605] "Saudi clerics detained in apparent bid to silence dissent" *Reuters*, 10 September 2017, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-security-arrests/saudi-clerics-detained-in-apparent-bid-to-silence-dissent-idUKKCN1BL12D (accessed 4 March 2019); "Son of detained cleric denounces Saudi crackdown on independent voices", *Middle East Eye*, 6 September 2018, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/son-detained-cleric-denounces-saudi-crackdown-independent-voices (accessed 4 March 2019).

overwhelmingly young Saudi population – of which almost 70% is under 30-years-old – in the attempt to create a strengthened connection between the youth and the regime and reinforce a legitimacy questioned during the Arab uprisings, in the hope that socio-economic liberalization would neutralise calls for political liberalization.[606] In this context, Sahwa clerics' opposition to social liberalization, described as Westernization, could be highly detrimental to regime legitimacy among their millions-strong following and, hence, these clerics, especially the most popular ones, are perceived as actors in a political threat to the identity and stability of the regime.[607] While in the years immediately after the Arab uprisings the threat was more clearly perceived towards the regional political interests of the regime than in its domestic dimension, under the reign of Mohammad bin Salman the domestic dimension rose to prominence, inextricably fused with Saudi regional policies, in what this thesis' framework has defined an intermestic threat.

As scholar Guido Steinberg highlighted, the Saudi regime sees the Muslim Brotherhood as 'competing for allegiance among the Gulf populations and challenging the religious legitimacy of the Saudi state'.[608] Indeed, to contextualise the regime's perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia, it is essential to consider a recurring trope in regime-Brotherhood relations: the perceived capability of the Sahwa movement to strengthen, through a religious language, the legitimacy of state policies and ideology against Arab nationalists, against al-Qa'ida, or against the 'Iranian threat'. Conversely, the regime has exerted pressures and repression when Sahwa clerics have opposed its policies, especially as they have routinely done so on religious grounds, thus weakening the state's legitimacy. This is a sharp contrast with the official Wahhabi establishment, whose clerics have almost unequivocally endorsed the regime's policies domestically and internationally.[609] On the other hand, the confrontation that has been brewing between the regime and the Sahwa since 2011, which has

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[606] Interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat, London, 19 May 2018; The demographic data is quoted in Martin Chulov "Saudi society is rigid, its youth restless. The prince's reforms need to succeed", *The Guardian*, 2 September 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/02/saudi-prince-reforms-society-rigid-youth-restless, (accessed 19 March 2019).

[607] Interview of the author with a Saudi journalist, London, 8 April 2019

[608] Guido Steinberg, "The Gulf States and the Muslim Brotherhood," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 9 March 2014.

[609] Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and politics in Saudi Arabia*.

since 2016 increasingly relied on total repression, gives an indication of how the regime has been underestimating the possible societal dimension of such confrontation and namely the socio-political risk to deepen the fault lines between regime supporters and the large number of Sahwa followers.[610]

5.4 Saudi Arabia and the 'jihadi threat'.

The Saudi regime's perceptions of the threat posed by jihadism evolved significantly after the 2011 Arab uprisings, as the apparent rejection of existing ruling models in the region interacted with a sectarian-charged political environment and war-ridden scenarios to give new impetus to extremism and political violence, under the banners of al-Qa'ida and Daesh. From the Saudi leadership's point of view, regional dynamics were as relevant in shaping perceptions of this new wave of jihadism as domestic ones, and the historical context was crucial.[611]

Jihadi extremism posed the first serious challenge of the modern times to the Saudi regime in 1979, when a group of around 500 insurgents, led by Juhayman bin Sayf al-Otaibi, seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, protesting against the al-Saud's policies of modernisation and Westernization and asking for their overthrow.[612] While the Grand Mosque was recaptured in less than the three weeks, this event had a profound impact on the regime's collective memory, as it exposed a dilemma that was going to remain crucial for years to come: how to reconcile the necessity to ally and align with Western powers, crucial for the regime's security, without alienating a deeply conservative - and, at times, anti-Western - population.[613] At that time, King Khalid bin Abdulaziz al-Saud thought that 'the solution to the religious upheaval was simple: more religion' and tried to reconcile the contradiction by compartmentalising the country's international posture and its domestic life, maintaining its Western allies while giving clerics

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[610] Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar based in North America, Skype, 12 April 2019

[611] Interview of the author with a young Saudi scholar researching Saudi foreign policy, London, 3 December 2018

[612] Robert Lacey. *Inside the Kingdom : Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia.* (London: Penguin), 2009.

[613] Fred H. Lawson "Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf" in Kamrava, ed. *International Politics of the Persian Gulf.*

more power to introduce strictly conservative social policies.[614] However, the contradictions remained.

Indeed, a central argument for Osama bin Laden's call to jihad in 1996 was the presence of non-Muslim, US troops in Saudi Arabia, home of the two holy cities, during the 1990-1991 Gulf Crisis, which bin Laden considered unacceptable.[615] Bin Laden leveraged this argument to cultivate Saudi Arabia as a recruitment and fundraising ground, establishing al-Qa'ida's most important support base in terms of finances, recruits - including 15 of the 19 terrorists involved in the 9/11 attacks - and clerical opinions in support of its strategy and actions.[616] When the US invaded Afghanistan and threatened al-Qa'ida's headquarters, bin Laden formally ordered Saudi fighters in Afghanistan to return to the Kingdom and prepare a campaign under the banner of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). That campaign would lead to 'historically unprecedented levels of internal violence' in Saudi Arabia, with attacks or attempted attacks almost every year between 2003 and 2009.[617] Arguably, three events were the most significant in terms of their long-lasting impact on regime's perceptions. In November 2003 two suicide bombers drove an explosives-filled van into the Muhayya residential complex. While an operational success, the Muhayya bombing was a political failure: given that most victims were Arab and Muslims and the attack happened during the month of Ramadan, public opinion shifted firmly against the militants.[618] In February 2006, a group of militants attempted, unsuccessfully, to drive two explosives-laden vehicles into the Abqaiq oil refinery. This was a clear indication that AQAP wanted to exploit the regime's economic vulnerability, its dependency on oil revenues.[619] Finally, in August 2009, a suicide bomber detonated his explosives in the Jeddah Palace of Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, then Assistant Minister of Interior for Security Affairs and counter-terrorism chief,

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[614] Lacey. *Inside the Kingdom,* p. 48.
[615] Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 23-30
[616] Thomas Hegghammer. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2010.
[617] J. E. Peterson, "Saudi Arabia: Internal Security Incidents Since 1979," *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, no. 3, 2008.
[618] Neil MacFarquhar, "Among Saudis, Attack Has Soured Qaeda Supporters," *The New York Times*, 11 November 2003
[619] Simon Henderson. "Al-Qaeda Attack on Abqaiq: The Vulnerability of Saudi Oil.", PolicyWatch 1082, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2006

while he was receiving well-wishers for Ramadan.[620] This was the second assassination attempt against Mohammad bin Nayef, and would be followed by two other attempts in 2009 and 2010.[621] It was also a clear exposure of another vulnerability of the regime which, due to its high level of personalisation, could be destabilised with a targeted attack on a single high-profile figure.

As scholar Thomas Hegghammer put it, 'if Saudi Arabia's policing of its militant Islamist community had been periodically complacent or inefficient in the past, its approach changed completely after AQAP turned against the Kingdom'.[622] All resources were devoted to combating domestic jihadism, with high-level training of the security forces and large investments in electronic and technical surveillance.[623] Saudi security services worked to turn the public's animosity towards the group into cooperation to facilitate its response, carrying out massive security crackdowns targeting leaders, operatives and the groups' resources, including in terms of financing, weapons, and infrastructures such as safe houses and operational centres.[624] Saudi authorities also used the mass media, the official religious authorities and the education system to carry on an information campaign against al-Qa'ida, by highlighting their Muslim and Arab victims.[625]

When Daesh was established in 2014 in Mosul, the group was instantly perceived both as a regional and a domestic risk by the Saudi regime.[626] Indeed, in November 2014 self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urged its followers to launch attacks in Saudi Arabia, 'the head of the snake and stronghold of disease'.[627] Relying on the lessons extracted from AQAP's failures, Daesh worked to identify acceptable targets. Attempting to take advantage of the unprecedented sectarian hatred that had disseminated throughout the region and in the Kingdom, and that was enabled by Saudi Wahhabi preachers, the group

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[620] "Saudi royal survives attack claimed by Qaeda", *Reuters*, 28 August 2009, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-attack/saudi-royal-survives-attack-claimed-by-qaeda

[621] "Fourth assassination attempt against Prince foiled", *Saudi Gazette*, 22 August 2010.

[622] Hegghammer. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 21.

[623] Nawaf Obaid, "Remnants of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: Current Assessment,", Presentation at Council of Foreign Relations, New York, 2006

[624] Hegghammer. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, pp. 615-617.

[625] Ibid.

[626] Interview of the author with a Saudi official, London, 18 September 2018

[627] "Islamic State leader urges attacks in Saudi Arabia: speech", *Reuters*, 13 November 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-baghdadi (accessed 22 March 2019)

targeted predominantly the Shi'a community.[628] Given the recent Shi'a uprisings, scholars have assessed that Daesh also wanted to provoke a violent reaction from the Shi'a community against the Saudi government and 'ignite a sectarian civil war' in order to thrive in the ensuing chaos and to weaken the functional integrity of the Kingdom's institutions.[629] In November 2014 a Daesh cell targeted a Shi'a shrine in al-Ahsa governorate.[630] In March and May 2015, security patrols came under the fire in the suburbs of Riyadh.[631] The same month there was a suicide attack in the Mosque of Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb in Qatif, killing a total of 25 people and injuring at least another 120, and an attempted attack at al-Anud Mosque, both Shi'a mosques.[632] In 2016 there were over 30 attacks. In January, four armed men set Saudi ARAMCO's bus on fire and a suicide bomb attack took place in the Imam Rida Mosque, still in the Eastern province.[633] In July, during the month of Ramadan, a suicide bomber approached one of the most important sites of Islam, Prophet Muhammad's mosque in the city of Medina, another struck near the US consulate in Jeddah, and a third one made an attempt on a Shi'a mosque in Qatif.[634] Recognising this sectarian strategy, the regime reacted accordingly: following the May 2015 attack, King Salman dispatched Crown Prince Mohamed bin Nayef to Qatif to offer condolences, and referred to Shi'a worshippers who had prevented a second attack as 'martyrs' and 'heroes.'[635] Shi'a funerals were broadcasted in full on Saudi television and the attack was condemned by several clerics and the Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah al-Sheikh.[636] However, sectarian hatred in the public discourse could not be curbed so easily and the regime framed Sunni jihadism against Shi'as as a consequence not of domestic dynamics, but of regional events, whereby Iranian aggressive

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[628] In fact, as Cole Bunzel documents, 'Islamic State supporters online frequently quote official Saudi scholars to justify anti-Shia attacks.' See: Bunzel. "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States".

[629] Bilal Sabba, "Can the House of Saud Survive ISIS?" *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-11/can-house-saud-survive-isis (accessed 20 March 2019)

[630] Timeline: Al-Qaeda and ISIS attacks in Saudi Arabia, *Al Arabiya English*, 6 August 2015, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/08/06/Timeline-Al-Qaeda-and-ISIS-attacks-in-Saudi-Arabia.html (accessed 22 March 2019)

[631] Ibid.

[632] Ibid.

[633] "ISIS goes global: 143 attacks in 29 countries have killed 2,043", *CNN*, 12 February 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/index.html, (accessed 22 March 2019)

[634] Ibid.

[635] Sabba, "Can the House of Saud Survive ISIS?"

[636] Ibid.

expansionism had fuelled Sunni anger and sectarianism.[637] In October 2014 Nawaf Obaid, a long time special counsellor to Saudi ambassadors and the Royal Court, wrote in a piece titled *A Saudi view on the Islamic State*, that: 'Sunni empowerment is the key ingredient needed to defeat Sunni extremism'.[638] The article blamed Nouri al-Maliki's government in Iraq and the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, both under Iranian influence, for brutal and repressive policies against the Sunni communities, 'providing oxygen to the Daesh propaganda machine and giving weight to the message that the Sunnis have been abandoned.'[639]

The fact that this idea is entrenched in the Kingdom is proven by the relative popularity of Daesh's fights in Syria and Iraq that attracted, according to estimates by the Ministry of Interior, over 2000 Saudi recruits by 2016.[640] Leaked documents from the jihadi group on 759 Saudi foreign fighters, joining Daesh between 2013 and 2014, have proven that most of these individuals were young and not uneducated or poor, with the highest ratio hailing from the central conservative province of al-Qassim, where radical preachers enjoyed large influence.[641] The region, which was already central during AQAP campaigns in the 2000s, was also the epicentre of the small Buraydah uprising during 2011, which, in the view of Saudi expert Abdullah bin Khaled al-Saud was 'utilised by radical individuals and groups to sow discontent and disgruntlement towards the state and any of its symbols.'[642] In addition, given that Daesh rejects the idea of national borders, the distinction between the regional and domestic fight seemed particularly blurred as some of the Saudi foreign fighters, such as Ahmad Mohammad Asiri and Sultan bin Bakheit al-Otaibi, were arrested in September

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[637] A senior Saudi analyst at a think tank close to the leadership interviewed in London on 7 May 2018 stated that 'the hostile rhetoric coming from official Saudi sources was directed at Iran and those Shi'a cells associated to Iran and was the inevitable result of Iranian sectarian policy in the entire region and especially the criminal behaviour in Syria. '

[638] Nawaf Obaid and Saud al-Sarhan, "A Saudi view on the Islamic State", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 October 2014, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_saudi_arabia331 (accessed 20 March 2019)

[639] Ibid.

[640] "Country Report on Terrorism 2017: Saudi Arabia" by the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm (accessed 22 March 2019)

[641] Abdullah bin Khaled al-Saud, "Saudi Foreign Fighters: Analysis of Leaked Islamic State Entry Documents" International Center for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London, 2019.

[642] Ibid.

2016, upon their return to the Kingdom, for their involvement with a Daesh network plotting attacks domestically.[643] Per data of the General Intelligence Directorate, in 2016 Saudi security forces arrested more than 1,390 suspects accused of terrorism, including: 967 Saudi nationals, 154 Yemenis, 76 Syrians, 45 Egyptians, and 38 Pakistanis.[644] According to Nawaf Obaid, Saudi Arabia is a target for Daesh due to its authority over Mecca and Medina, epicentre of the Islamic life and essential to establish a 'caliphate'.[645] From the Saudi point of view, Obaid argued, 'any successful terrorist attack on either of the two holiest sites in Islam would substantially undermine the standing and prestige of the Kingdom in the Muslim world as the guardians and servants of the Two Holy Mosques. As such, the defence and security of Makkah and Madinah are of primordial and vital importance to the Saudi state.'[646] Indirectly this validates the idea that Daesh's threat to the Saudi regime is directed to its very identity as a regime over-emphasizing its Islamic credentials.

Indeed, the official religious establishment has condemned Daesh in the semi-official Saudi press almost weekly, and reiterated the idea that Saudi Arabia is, in fact, the true modern version of the first Islamic state ruled by Prophet Muhammad.[647] On the other hand, Daesh considers Saudi Arabia a failed version of the Islamic State, which has sacrificed religious piety at the altar of modernity. At the same time, the group has relied on Wahhabi religious treatises, and used Wahhabi theological concepts, to mobilize its supporters.[648] This exemplifies the long-standing contradictions emerged at least since 1979. However, the Saudi regime had enacted an ideological counter-offensive already to confront AQAP and doubled down on it against Daesh after 2014. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs introduced an obligation for Saudi-based clerics to obtain ministerial approval on foreign travel for charitable and proselytization activities, or making media appearances.[649] Saudi Arabia enhanced its existing programs on counter-

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[643] "السعودية تفكيك شبكة داعشية من 3 خلايا إرهابية" *Al Arabiya*, 19 September 2016, http://bit.ly/2hvh9ms (accessed 22 March 2019)

[644] "Country Report on Terrorism 2016: Saudi Arabia" by the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm (accessed 22 March 2019)

[645] Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine", p. 11

[646] Ibid.

[647] An accurate comparison of the Wahhabi and Daeshi theology is made in: Bunzel. "The Kingdom and the Caliphate".

[648] Ibid.

[649] Andreas Casptack, "Deradicalization programs in Saudi Arabia: A case study." *Middle East Institute,* Vol. 10 (2015).

radicalization and rehabilitation, including the Sakina Campaign for Dialogue to counter internet radicalization, as well as its extensive rehabilitation program at the Mohammed bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center, and establishing new entities to counter extremist propaganda, such as the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (Etidal).[650] Authorities organized seminars that refuted violent or extremist ideology and extended public awareness campaigns on media, social media, in education and at public events.[651]

Beyond these soft tactics, the regime also resorted to a security-heavy approach. Technologies for physical border security were upgraded, as much as cyber surveillance capabilities.[652] Between 2014 and 2016 Saudi Arabia strengthened its existing counterterrorism law, establishing a broader definition of terrorism that human rights organizations have strongly criticised as a weapon against non-violent political or social activism as well. In January 2016, Saudi Arabia carried out the death penalty for 43 long imprisoned Sunni extremists, mostly associated with AQAP's campaigns in 2000s.[653] Saudi Arabia joined the US-led international coalition against Daesh, participating in the bombing of Daesh targets, and in December 2015 launched the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, inviting several Sunni countries to join.[654] The Kingdom, along with Italy and the United States, co-leads the counter-ISIS Finance Group (CIFG): this was a crucial sector as, according to the 2017 US State Department's Country Report on Terrorism, 'despite serious and effective efforts to counter the funding of terrorism within the Kingdom, some individuals and entities in Saudi Arabia probably continue to serve as sources of financial support for terrorist groups'.[655] To address the issue, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority has asked financial institutions to implement international standards on anti-money laundering and

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[650] Ibid.; Christopher Boucek, "The Sakinah Campaign and internet counter-radicalization in Saudi Arabia." *CTC Sentinel* 1.9 (2008): pp. 1-4.
[651] Ibid.
[652] "Country Report on Terrorism 2017: Saudi Arabia" by the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm (accessed 22 March 2019).
[653] "Saudi Arabia executes 47 on terrorism charges", *Al Jazeera*, 3 January 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/saudiannounces-execution-47-terrorists, (accessed 21 March 2019)
[654] Brian Michael Jenkins. "A Saudi-Led Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism", Perspective, *RAND Corporation*, 2016.
[655] "Country Report on Terrorism 2017: Saudi Arabia"

countering terrorist financing, and penalties for financing terrorism have been extended to between three and 15 years' imprisonment in 2017.[656]

Overall, the measures enacted by the Saudi regime were effective in containing the jihadist threat both in the early 2000s and in the 2010s. The jihadist groups' traction amongst the Saudi populace was significant, especially with Daesh, but not overwhelming. The 2011 uprisings had a key impact on the phenomenon, both at the regional level, as they ignited the Syrian civil war and at the domestic level, where the Buraydah protests had some reverberations. In the regime's perceptions, the two dimensions were clearly linked, as detailed, among others, by Nawaf Obaid, who defined extremism an 'internal threat' while at the same time detailing connections with conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.[657] In this context, between 2015 and 2017, jihadist groups were viewed by Saudi leaders as a full-fledged threat with a political dimension, as they had the intent and capabilities to target the regime's stability and identity and the functional integrity of its borders and institutions. Several interviewees have highlighted how the regime's perceptions of jihadi groups are heavily influenced by the danger posed to the safety of individual leadership figures, such as Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman: an assassination of the Prince, given the power concentration in his hands, is thought to plunge the Kingdom into political instability.[658] The threat was also perceived in its military dimension, due to the attacks targeting the security forces and the intent on destabilising public security. There was also a strong societal dimension, as Daesh attempted to ignite a sectarian conflict within the Kingdom. The economic dimension was not irrelevant, as Saudi Arabia was compromised in the international financial system for the presence of terrorist financiers on its soil.[659] While their activities' span has been short-lived, jihadist groups have routinely represented multidimensional threats to the Saudi regime.

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[656] "Counterterrorism law comes into effect in Saudi Arabia", *Arab News*, 29 January 2019, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1443516/saudi-arabia (accessed 22 March 2019)

[657] Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine", p. 4.

[658] Interview of the author with a young Saudi scholar researching Saudi foreign policy, London, 3 December 2018; Interview of the author with a member of the team of a Council of Senior Scholars' Ulema, London, 14 August 2018; Interview of the author with a senior Saudi analyst at a think tank close to the leadership, London, 7 May 2018.

[659] Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019; Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar based in North America, Skype, 12 April 2019.

5.5 Saudi Arabia's security priorities after 2011.

In the course of this chapter, it has emerged how all the issues at the centre of the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises have been, indeed, perceived as threats with a political dimension from the point of view of the Saudi regime, especially in the post-2011 context. The Iranian and Shi'a threat in particular is the priority concern, followed by Islamism and then jihadi organizations. It has likewise emerged that the regime has reacted fiercely to contain these threats, with only partial success. At the same time, what really stood out from the analysis so far, has been the predominance of the intermestic nature in the perceptions of all the dangers examined. This speaks of strong underlying vulnerabilities weakening the state from within and creating enabling conditions for exogenous dangers to develop an internal dimension. While emerged in the course of the analysis, these vulnerabilities, both socio-political and socio-economic ones, deserve further scrutiny as arguably stand as the root causes of what May Darwich refers to as Saudi Arabia's ontological insecurity, i.e. the vulnerability of the Saudi state's identity. [660]

Darwich, alongside other scholars, explains this vulnerability looking back at the history of the foundation of the Saudi Kingdom.[661] The embryonic core of the Kingdom was formed when Mohammad Ibn Saud, a ruler from Najd, joined Mohammad 'Abd al-Wahab, a co-regionalist religious leader and theologian, to establish a political entity in 1732. Between the 19th and 20th century, the army led by Ibn Saud slowly but surely expanded its territorial control through military annexations, while Mohammad 'Abd al-Wahab's network of religious preachers, diffused thorough the Peninsula, provided religious legitimacy and ideological ammunitions to Ibn Saud to entrench such control.[662] Ibn Saud annexed the Eastern Province, the Hijaz and, finally the southern region of 'Asir, Najran and Jizan. Saudi Arabia's foundational myth is therefore one of conquest and suppression of ensuing grievances as much as of existing regional identities.[663]

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[660] Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity".
[661] Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity"; Tim Niblock. *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*. (London: Routledge), 2006; Alexei Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi,) 2000.
[662] Ibid.
[663] Ibid.

Najdi tribal elites were put at the centre of the Kingdom's emerging power, while other tribes were forcefully integrated into the new national entity, simultaneously subjugated to the new political authority and co-opted by it through their integration in the military sector, primarily Saudi Arabia's National Guard.[664] As the conquerors' ideology, Wahhabism became the dominant ideology, and was imposed over the conquered regions as a key ingredient of the new regime's identity.[665] Given its fundamentalist views, and its inherent exclusivist nature, Wahhabism alienated non-Wahhabi Sunnis and Shi'a, defined as deviant in the orthodoxy, in both the Eastern Province, the more liberal Hijaz and the south.[666] While politically repressed, regional identities resisted - and, in some cases, became more entrenched - at a socio-cultural level. In the Hijaz, for instance, 'communities claimed their superior sophistication and cosmopolitan character to differentiate themselves from the Najdi-Wahhabi conquerors'.[667] In regions distant from the centres of authority, with a relatively homogeneous population and the presence of a local elite, such as the Eastern Province and Qassim, strong regional identities also fuelled opposition and created the conditions for mobilization, including in 2011.[668]

This Najdi-Wahhabi power nexus effectively prevented the emergence of a socio-politically cohesive national identity or the bridging of aforementioned tribal, ideological and sectarian fault lines which have divided the Saudi nation from within for decades. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Saudi Kings have attempted to shape the regime's self-identity through pan-Islamism.[669] In fact King Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, who ruled from 1964 to 1975, was the first Saudi ruler to assume the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and to establish a number of national and supranational institutions to promote cooperation in the Muslim world under Saudi leadership, such as the Organization of Islamic Conference

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[664] Joseph Kostiner. "Transforming Dualities: Tribe and State Formation." in Philip Shukry Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (eds.) *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*. University of California Press, 1991.
[665] Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and politics in Saudi Arabia.*
[666] Ibid..
[667] Mai Yamami, *Cradle of Islam: the Hijaz and the Quest for Identity in Saudi Arabia*, (London: I.B. Tauris), 2009.
[668] Sultan Alamer "Beyond Sectarianism and Ideology: Regionalism and Collective Political Action in Saudi Arabia" in Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed), *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2018: pp. 97 – 117.
[669] Ibid.

and the Muslim World League.[670] This was also a direct consequence of Saudi Arabia's jurisdiction over the two holiest cities of Islam within its borders, Mecca and Medina. Additionally Islam provided legitimacy to a monarchical rule, in the midst of a secular and republican pan-Arab wave that swept the region during the 1950s and 1960s.[671] In this context, the year 1979 posed a double challenge to the regime's identity. Iran's Islamic Revolution undermined the Saudi leadership of the entire Muslim world, claiming a stronger authority over the Shi'a communities.[672] The seizure of the Grand Mosque exemplified how basing political authority of a modern state over religious legitimacy offered an easy flank to fundamentalist non-state actors to challenge the former based on the latter's integrity, in a pattern bound to repeat itself with al-Qa'ida and Daesh.[673] Prioritizing the threat posed by the actors with the greater capabilities, the Saudi regime in the 1980s focused its political response towards Iran. The Wahhabi clerical establishment joined in on the political rhetoric to restore a secure self-identity eroded by another leader's claim to pan-Islamism, by highlighting the distinctiveness of Sunni Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis a demonised 'Other', Shi'a Iran.[674] The inevitable sectarian tune of the political operation has, however, reinforced the Shi'a sense of marginalization since the 1980s and onwards. A challenge to Wahhabism's fundamentalism as the defining identity of the state came under the reign of King Abdallah in the early 2000s, who, as a response to the danger emanating from al-Qa'ida, reached out both to the Shi'a and to the Hijazi liberals through reformist policies.[675] When oil prices surged to unprecedented levels in the 2000s, Saudi rulers had vast financial resources at their disposal to consolidate and expand their networks of patronage, clientelism and co-optation, thus reinforcing their legitimacy, without the support of Wahhabi clerics.[676] However, this also highlighted the discrimination of some Saudi communities with a more constrained access to rents.

For example, tribal groups traditionally less loyalist to the al-Saud were also relatively disadvantaged both socially and economically within the Kingdom,

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[670] Hegghammer. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 17.
[671] Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and politics in Saudi Arabia*.
[672] Niblock. *Saudi Arabia*, p. 55.
[673] Ibid.
[674] Niblock. *Saudi Arabia,* p. 57.
[675] Mai Yamani. "The two faces of Saudi Arabia." *Survival* 50.1 (2008): pp. 143-156.
[676] Niblock. *Saudi Arabia.*

including during this period of largesse.[677] Overall, tribalism as a form of socio-political organization of a community was actively inhibited by the state, not only to limit the tribes' capability to mobilise against the regime but also because tribalism contradicted some of the core concepts of pan-Islamism, such as that of *umma*.[678] As a result of their co-optation in the security forces, in the 2000s tribal Saudis have represented an overwhelming percentage of soldiers defending Saudi borders in the Yemen wars, as well as fighting jihadi groups domestically.[679] Tribal communities living in Najran and Jizan have become Houthi targets in the 2015 war in Yemen.[680] The Saudi regime is aware that these pressures could foster opposition, as shown by King Salman's decisions to pay occasional bonus salaries to soldiers serving in the Yemeni operations, as well as to employees of the Interior and Defense Ministries and the National Guard, and exempt them from subsidies' cuts promoted by Vision 2030.[681] The Saudi tribal landscape features over a hundred tribes ranging from several hundreds to millions of members, increasingly able to forge networks and reinforce tribal identity through new communication technology and media.[682] While the tribes have so far focused on apolitical sectors of the public life, to avoid reprisals from the regime, they have shown capacity to coordinate in local elections.[683] Indeed, the Saudi regime remains aware and wary of independent tribal organization and the tribes' growing sociopolitical influence as much as of tribalism's impact on national unity.[684] This awareness is exemplified, for instance, by the fact that the Saudi regime itself has financed cross-border tribes with kinship ties to Saudi

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[677] Sebastian Maisel. "The new rise of tribalism in Saudi Arabia." *Nomadic Peoples* (2014): p. 114

[678] Ibid., p. 117

[679] "Saudi tribes refuse to leave Yemen border zone", *The Observers*, 15 August 2016, https://observers.france24.com/en/20160815-saudi-tribes-refusing-evacuate-yemen-border (accessed 19 March 2019).

[680] Ibid.; Interview of the author with a member of the team of a Council of Senior Scholars' Ulema, London, 14 August 2018.

[681] "Saudi king orders one-month salary bonus for security personnel", *Reuters*, 29 April 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-military-bonuses/saudi-king-orders-one-month-salary-bonus-for-security-personnel (accessed 19 March 2019); "King Salman reinstates annual bonuses to Saudi civil servants", *Al Arabiya English*, 22 October 2018, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/10/22/King-Salman-reinstates-annual-bonuses-to-civil-servants.html (accessed 19 March 2019).

[682] Maisel. "The new rise of tribalism in Saudi Arabia."

[683] Ibid., p. 116

[684] Interview of the author with a member of the team of a Council of Senior Scholars' Ulema, London, 14 August 2018.

Arabia to mobilise against rival governments in Yemen, Syria and Qatar in 2017.[685]

However, sectarianism has been a much greater obstacle than tribalism towards building an inclusive Saudi national identity. In 2009 US diplomats in Dhahran recorded the Shi'a communities in the Eastern Province as feeling socially, religiously, politically and economically discriminated against in a way that compromised their 'sense of Saudi national identity'.[686] As previously explored, these grievances became real in the calls for secession voiced by Nimr al-Nimr in 2009, followed by the 2011 uprisings. To properly contextualise the regime's prioritization of these events, it is paramount to recognise that the Eastern Province is where the bulk of Saudi Arabia's oil resources are located, and oil revenues accounted for 49% of Saudi Arabia's GDP in 2011.[687] The Eastern Province is also the location of the state-owned energy major ARAMCO, the most strategically valuable company of the Kingdom. Three key commercial and industrial ports, King Abdul Aziz Ports, Jubail Port and King Fahad Industrial Port, are also situated there. This extraordinary concentration of economic value in the region, in relation to its relevance for the entire national economy, fundamentally impacts the regime's perceptions of events in the Eastern Province.[688] Yet, the regime never decided to go beyond short-term securitarian approaches in the restive region, and towards long-term solutions of national cohesion that would challenge Wahhabi orthodoxy, something which was long believed 'could fatally undermine one of the pillars of al-Saud rule, Wahhabism.'[689]

King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, appear to have chosen a hybrid strategy, combining a repressive crackdown approach to crush Shi'a political dissent - and political dissent in general - with a recalibration of the official

[685] Maryam Al-Kuwari. "Tribe and Tribalism: The Trojan Horse of GCC States?." in Krieg (ed) *Divided Gulf*, pp. 37-51.

[686] "Eastern Province Shia frustrated", diplomatic cable, US Consulate in Dhahran, *Wikileaks*, 1 November 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DHAHRAN266_a.html (accessed 13 March 2019)

[687] Data available on The World Bank online datase, "Oil rents (% of GDP)", http://www.worldbank.org/

[688] Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar focused on Saudi-Iran relations, London, 17 April 2019; Interview of the author with a Saudi official, London, 18 September 2018. This point was also raised in a closed-door event held in London on 20 September 2018 by a Saudi scholar and Director of a Riyadh-based think tank with ties to the Saudi regime.

[689] Yamani, "The Two Faces of Saudi Arabia", p. 151.

discourse away from sectarianism and towards national cohesion and a limited engagement of the Shi'a community. A Shi'a businessman interviewed by *The Economist* in 2018 said in these regards: 'We're going to be an integral part of the Kingdom as full citizens for the first time.'[690] Daesh terrorist attacks against Shi'a mosques and the realization that enabling sectarianism was abetting the penetration of jihadist groups into the Kingdom, certainly played a role, according to a French diplomat with a long experience in the Kingdom.[691] Shortly after, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue launched a program to enhance national cohesion focused on the Eastern Province under the name Naseej (woven fabric).[692] In 2016 a Shi'a woman from the Eastern Province whose son was killed stopping a suicide bomber at a Shi'a mosque, Kawthar al-Arbash, was appointed by the King to the Shura Council.[693] Two years later a former member of the Qatif municipal council from Awamiyah, Nabih al-Ibrahim, was appointed too.[694] In 2018 King Salman met in Dhahran with a number of local clerics and businessmen, including leading opposition cleric Hassan al-Saffar and Sayyid Ali Naser, a Saudi representative of Najaf's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.[695] Once the 2017 crackdown, and shelling, in Awamiyya was over, the government channelled over USD 64 millions to reconstruction, to build new roads, residential units, shopping centres and a small hospital.[696] In exchange for political quiescence, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is offering top-down concessions. This is both instrumental to strengthen the Saudi nation from within and coherent with the aforementioned regional strategy to sway Arab Shi'a communities away from Iranian influence at home and in neighbouring countries,

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[690] Shi'a businessman quoted in "Shias are doing better in Saudi Arabia", *The Economist*, 30 August 2018.

[691] Interview of the author with a French diplomat previously posted in Jeddah, Paris, 13 September 2018

[692] "'Naseej' increases social cohesion", *Saudi Gazette*, 10 May 2016, http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/164674 (accessed 19 March 2019)

[693] "Mother of Saudi killed preventing ISIS attack appointed to Shoura council", *Al Arabiya English*, 3 December 2016, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/12/03/Mother-of-Saudi-who-fought-off-ISIS-attack-appointed-to-Shoura-council.html (accessed 13 March 2019).

[694] "Dr. Yousef bin Trad Al-Saadoun, Nabih bin Abdulmohsen Al-Ibrahim appointed as Members of Shura Council", *Saudi Press Agency*, 26 February 2018, https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1729619 (accessed 13 March 2019).

[695] "وصول خادم الحرمين إلى الدمام استعداداً للقمة", الأوسط الشرق 12 April 2018.

[696] "Shias are doing better in Saudi Arabia", *The Economist*.

such as Iraq.[697] However, overtures to Saudi Shi'a still appear very limited: a law criminalising hate speech and discrimination on the basis of sect, ethnicity, tribal background has met resistances in the Shura Council, and no Shi'a has yet been appointed to the Council of Senior Scholars, as judges in national courts, or in high-ranked positions in the security forces.[698]

Indeed, the Crown Prince's moves to curb the power of the Wahhabi clerical establishment and its religious police serve a wider purpose for his regime. Mohammad bin Salman's initiatives for social liberalization are a crucial part of his *Vision 2030*, meant to reinforce the bond between the leadership and an exceptionally young population - with 70% of Saudi nationals being under 30 years of age - put to test by socio-economic vulnerabilities inherent in Saudi Arabia's political economic model and socio-political vulnerabilities inherent in its foundational myth.[699] Through a mix of co-optation and coercion, Mohammad bin Salman has pushed clerics in the Council of Senior Scholars to approve decrees previously regarded as *taboos*, including the right for women to drive and the right to hold non-segregated entertainment events.[700] This leadership's long-term objective seems to be to expropriate the Wahhabi establishment of its traditional legitimizing role and build a new form of hyper-nationalism, less attached to religious ideologies and more inspired by local traditions, tribal folklore and a cult of the leadership.[701] If the Kingdom's socio-political vulnerabilities shall be tackled through this operation, Saudi Arabia's future security agenda, even on the issues examined in this thesis, will come out significantly impacted, especially on

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[697] Interview of the author with a Saudi scholar focused on Saudi-Iran relations, London, 17 April 2019

[698] "Saudi Shoura approves study of anti-hate law", *Arab News*, 14 November 2017, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1193071/saudi-arabia (accessed 19 March 2019); "Shias are doing better in Saudi Arabia", *The Economist.*

[699] The data is quoted in Martin Chulov "Saudi society is rigid, its youth restless. The prince's reforms need to succeed", *The Guardian*, 2 September 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/02/saudi-prince-reforms-society-rigid-youth-restless, (accessed 19 March 2019).

[700] Gadi Hitman, "Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism and Nationalism: The Evolution of Wataniyya into Qawmiyya", *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Volume 27, Issue 1, Spring 2018, pp. 79 – 96.

[701] Eman Alhussein, "Saudi First: How hyper-nationalism is transforming Saudi Arabia", European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 June 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia (accessed 19 June 2019); Interview of the author with a French diplomat previously posted in Jeddah, Paris, 13 September 2018; Interview of the author with a young Saudi scholar researching Saudi foreign policy, London, 3 December 2018.

mitigating intermestic risks or threats. However, there are challenges associated with this strategy. Firstly, as the Wahhabi religious establishment is sidelined, they will also cease to serve as a buffer to deflect blame for failed policies from the regime.[702] This is particularly the case with the economic policies included in Vision 2030 and meant to overcome the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the Kingdom, including the overdependence on revenues from energy resourses, the high percentage of unemployment among the youth and the inequality of wealth distribution. Secondly, there are strongly divisive elements in this hyper-nationalism - centered on the state, rather than on society - embodied by the reinforced totalitarism and repression of dissent. Both trends could, in the long run, ignite internal risks into full-fledged threats in the regime's perceptions. Finally, the foreign policy assertiveness that is both justified and encouraged by hyper-nationalism could fuel the perceptions of external threats, locking the Saudi regime in a sensitive security dilemma.

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[702] Alhussein, "Saudi First: How hyper-nationalism is transforming Saudi Arabia".

6.0 CHAPTER SIX: THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The United Arab Emirates has been at the forefront, together with Saudi Arabia, of the pushback against Qatar resulting in the two intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017. After the power succession in Riyadh at the beginning of 2015, Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince, *de facto* leader of the UAE, has tightened a strategic alliance with Deputy Crown Prince and then Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad Bin Salman. Such axis, tha major driving force for the intra-GCC crises, has consolidated a proactive pattern in foreign and security policies, at a regional level, for both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, in which the former, despite being a small state by all measures, is as much in the driving seat as the latter.[703]

It will be here argued that the roots of this assertiveness are to be found in the threat perceptions of both countries. In both cases, events in and around the year 2011 have been pivotal in highlighting perceived or real vulnerabilities. For the UAE specifically, changing dynamics and balances of power at the regional level have been the focus of attention.[704] Iran and its proxies, the Islamist constellation and jihadi organizations have been identified in the public rhetoric and political narrative and discourse as the sources of multiple threats in the post-2011 context.[705] The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the leadership's perceptions regarding each of these actors or alleged threats, identified by the Riyadh Agreements as threats. It will be argued that those are perceived, as per this thesis's definitions, mostly as exogenous risks or threats, although with some internal repercussions, especially in the case of non-violent Islamist groups. Conclusions will be finally drawn on the roots of such perceptions and the fundamental priorities in the security calculus of the UAE, preserving the unity of the seven Emirates' Federation and the UAE's growing interests vis-à-vis the

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[703] Hussein Ibish. "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy." *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington,* 2017; http://www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/UAE-Security_ONLINE.pdf (accessed 14 June 2018); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. "Transformations in UAE's Foreign Policy". Expert Brief, *Al Sharq Forum*, 2017 http://www.sharqforum.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2017/06/Transformations-1.pdf (accessed 14 June 2018).
[704] Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy."
[705] Ibid.

regional order. In order to test these ideas, it will be necessary to analyse the narratives and discourses and benchmark them against data and factual information about the individual issues as well as the main socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities of the seven Emirates. The starting point would be, as in the other cases, a closer look at the events of 2011 at a domestic as well as regional level, from the UAE's point of view.

6.1 The UAE and the Arab Spring.

The UAE did not experience a full chapter of the Arab Spring, and no street protests were held in the country.[706] However, possibly on the long haul of the events in the wider region, some dissent, as well as aspirations for political reforms, were voiced in the usually politically quiescent Emirate in the year 2011. Mostly met with repression - mixed with some degree of cooptation - the UAE's experience with those events highlighted where the government's sensitivities lied, i.e. on the issue of political Islam, both domestically and regionally. Arguably, these were informed by the belief that the Arab Spring had brought to the surface socio-political vulnerabilities related to the contested legitimacy of the political order in the Emirates outside Abu Dhabi and Dubai and, particularly, in the wider MENA region.

In February 2011 the UAE government expanded the size of the electorate for proposing candidates for the Federal National Council (FNC) - the consultative parliamentary body of the UAE - from 6,000 to 12,000 voters.[707] Just few days later the government announcement was met with a petition addressed to the UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan and the members of the Supreme Council, the body that includes all rulers of the seven Emirates, asking that the FNC be given more authority, including legislative powers and the ability to hold officials accountable, and for the introduction of universal suffrage.[708] The

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[706] Ingo Forstenlechner, Emilie Rutledge, and Rashed Salem Alnuaimi. "The UAE, the "Arab Spring" and Different Types of Dissent." *Middle East Policy* 19.4 (2012): pp. 54-67.

[707] Inter-Parliamentary Union, United Arab Emirates, Majlis Watani Itihadi (Federal National Council), http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2333_E.htm (accessed 6 June 2018)

[708] The petition, sent via courier and posted publicly online after receiving no response for two days, is available at http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/uaepetition71/ (accessed 6 June 2018)

petition was signed by 133 Emiratis, including academics, former government officials and FNC members, journalists and activists.[709] Five people among the signatories were subsequently arrested in April 2011, charged of 'publicly insulting the UAE's leaders' under articles 176 and 8 of the UAE Penal Code and accused of 'undermining national security', sentenced to year-longs imprisonment, and then pardoned within 24 hours.[710] The five activists included: Ahmed Mansoor, an engineer and blogger; Nasser bin Ghaith, an economist and university lecturer at Sorbonne Abu Dhabi; online activists Fahad Salim Dalk, Ahmed Abdul-Khaleq, and Hassan Ali al-Khamis. Both Ahmed Mansoor and Nasser bin Ghaith would then be arrested again between 2015 and 2017 and both would be given harsh prison sentences for their criticism of the Emirati regime.[711] Ahmed Abdul-Khaleq, the only bidun – from Arabic 'without', meaning without nationality or stateless – hosting a blog on the socio-economic discrimination against his community, named *Emaraty Bedoon*, was arrested and subsequently expelled from the country in 2012.[712] Despite the state's demonstrative quick reaction, the first petition, that could be considered the product of an online activism for political and civil rights going on at least since 2009, was followed by increased online and offline activities. Several UAE civil society organisations, of different socio-political inspiration, published their own statements calling for direct elections and for an FNC with full oversight and legislative powers. Among those organisations was the Reform and Social Guidance Association (al-Islah), an association close to the Muslim Brotherhood, advocating for political reforms and more representation, echoing the Brotherhood's traditional political discourse.[713]

In July 2011, the government reacted by further enlarging the electoral college to 129,000 voters: despite the enlargement, however, eligibility criteria for voting remained quite restrictive and only just 12 percent of the population resulted

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[709] Nour Malas, "UAE Citizens Petition Rulers for Elected Parliament," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 2011.

[710] "Five jailed UAE activists 'receive presidential pardon'", *BBC*, 28 November 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15922492, (accessed 5 June 2018)

[711] Simon Kerr, "Jailing of UAE dissenter prompts outcry by rights groups", *Financial Times*, 31 May 2012, https://www.ft.com/content/3a6c30b6-64e2-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56, (accessed 5 June 2018)

[712] "UAE: Stop Expulsion of Bidun Activist", *Human Rights Watch*, 15 July 2012, https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/15/uae-stop-expulsion-bidun-activist, (accessed 5 June 2018)

[713] al-Zo'by and Başkan, "Discourse and oppositionality in the Arab Spring".

eligible.[714] Prioritizing its functions of welfare provider, as customary of rentier systems, the government also reacted by signing a $2.7 billion agreement to help poorer nationals pay off outstanding loans, boosting welfare benefits by up to 20 percent, and granting huge public sector pay increases, in some cases up to 100 percent.[715] At the same time, the opposition, especially those dissidents with ties to al-Islah, continued to be reserved the harshest treatment. In December 2011 seven of al-Islah's active members were permanently stripped of their citizenship and charged with 'involvement in actions that pose a threat to national security, and connections to organizations and individuals on the terror watch list', just days after the UAE-5 were released.[716] The seven included Islamic scholar Mohammad ʿAbdul Razzaq al-Siddiq, Ahmed Ghaith al-Suwaidi, ʿAli Hussain al-Hammadi, Shaheen ʿAbdullah al-Hosani, Hussain Munif 'Abdullah al-Jabri, Hassan al-Jabri, and Ibrahim Hassan al-Marzouqi. The arrests marked only the beginning of the crackdown on al-Islah. By the end of 2012, 94 alleged members of the group, known as UAE-94, had been arrested, with 69 of them sentenced to between 7 and 15 year in prison.[717] Among them was Mohammed al-Mansoori, the deputy chairman of al-Islah and a former president of the Jurists' Association. Until 2010, he had also been a legal adviser to the government of Ras Al Khaimah, one of the seven UAE emirates.[718] Another high-profile arrested was Sultan bin Kayed al-Qasimi, chairman of al-Islah and cousin of Saud bin Saqr al-Qasimi, the Emir of the Northern Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah: arrested in April 2012, he was sentenced in the UAE-94 trial to ten years in prison.[719] Given his position, al-Qasimi was perceived as a liability for the Abu Dhabi leadership, as will further be examined. In short, his arrest underlined a special attention

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[714] "UAE expands voter list to head off protest", *Reuters*, 11 July 2011, http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE76A4O520110711, (accessed 5 June 2018)

[715] Courtney Freer. "Rentier Islamism in the absence of elections; the political role of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017), p. 492

[716] "U.S., UK Should Criticize Dissident Arrests," *Human Rights Watch*, 2012, http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/01/uae-us-uk-should-criticize-dissident (accessed 5 June 2018)

[717] "UAE Islamists convicted for plotting government coup", *BBC*, 2 July 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23142248 (accessed 6 June 2018)

[718] Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2018, p.104

[719] Simon Kerr, "UAE Islamist detained in ruler's palace", *Financial Times*, 25 April 2012, https://www.ft.com/content/f6aaa4cc-8e9e-11e1-ac13-00144feab49a , (accessed 5 June 2018).

devolved by the regime not only to al-Islah, but specifically to those associated with the group in the Northern Emirates.

Indeed, the perceptions of the government with regards to the political activism taking place in 2011 was largely built around the involvement of al-Islah.[720] This is further evidenced by the narrative employed vis-à-vis the group. For instance, commenting the major legal process of 2013 against the UAE-94, state news agency WAM focused only on the Islamist group describing it as 'a secret organisation accused of attempting to overthrow the government.'[721] While the topic of relations between the UAE government and Islamist groups will be analysed in-depth in a following section, this angle is also particularly crucial to unpack the intersections among vulnerabilities and perceptions around the events of 2011.

The first element to consider is the identity of those embracing political activism. On one hand, al-Islah initially sought to work with liberal pro-democracy activists, as the Muslim Brotherhood did during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, marking the first time that the secular and Islamist opposition came together in a public political undertaking.[722] On the other hand, there always remained substantial differences among the groups.[723] For instance, the liberal activists seemed to lose momentum soon after sending off the March 2011 petition. In addition to that, they were individually behind the same cause, rather than collectively organised in a proper structure.[724] This lack of coordination, an element of weakness for any opposition movement, was facilitated by the fact that political parties or societies are outlawed in the UAE.[725] Conversely, al-Islah,

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[720] This was underlined in several interviews including: Interview of the author with an Emirati official within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with one senior researcher at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, Skype, 7 February 2019.

[721] "UAE jails scores of people in coup trial", *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/07/20137273117337778.html, (accessed 5 June 2018).

[722] Freer, Rentier Islamism, p. 492

[723] Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, "Setting the Record Straight on Al Islah in the UAE", *Al Monitor*, 15 October 2012, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/uae-setting-the-record-straight.html, (accessed 6 June 2019)

[724] Forstenlechner, Rutledge, Alnuaimi. "The UAE, the "Arab Spring" and Different Types of Dissent."

[725] Sean Foley, "The UAE: political issues and security dilemmas." *Middle East* 3.1 (1999): p. 26.

characterised as a social NGO, and following the highly centralised and hierarchical organizational structure traditional of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates around the world, is the oldest, largest and best organised society in the UAE.[726] This longevity, together with the organization's effective internal structure represented significant and risky political capabilities from the government's point of view.[727]

The second element to consider is the nature of the grievances and demands driving political activism. In these regards there was a major difference between liberals and Islamists. One of the main reasons that liberals backed down relatively soon, in addition to the coercive response of the authorities, appears to be related to the traction of their demands among the wider population. There has traditionally been a lack of grassroots support for challenging the state for political liberalization in the UAE, where a generous welfare state and general positive economic conditions, depending on a network of patronage and clientelism with the rulers, discourage dissent.[728] In a classic feature of rentier systems, citizens rarely resort to challenging their governments, managing their rents, unless their stake in those rents are challenged.[729] Several sources have in fact argued that most Emirati citizens do not support the overhaul of the existing UAE political system, in place since before the British protectorate over the Emirates, which many believe provides functioning governance.[730] The system, often referred as 'majlis-style' democracy, consists in open courts between citizens and community or tribal leaders where citizens can raise concerns or make requests: a formula that has been effective in the past, given the small size of the UAE's population.[731] In a 2004 leaked diplomatic cable from the US Embassy in Abu Dhabi, it is highlighted by US diplomatic officers that even the

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[726] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*.

[727] Interview of the author with an Emirati official within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with an Emirati political scientist close to the leadership, London, 4 October 2018

[728] Ehteshami and Wright, (eds.) *Reform in the Middle East oil monarchies*.

[729] Giacomo Luciani, "Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework," in Giacomo Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), p.75

[730] This was argued by a prominent Emirati political commentator Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in his article "UAE Security Crackdown: A View From The Emirates" published on *Al Monitor*, 18 July 2012. It was also reiterated in three different interviews conducted by the author in Abu Dhabi in April 2018 with three non-Emirati professors of international relations in UAE-based Universities.

[731] Al Qassemi, "UAE Security Crackdown: A View From The Emirates".

strongest backers of increased political participation in the UAE frequently refer to the need for caution and gradualism in reforms, mainly due to concerns about the 'destabilizing' effects of direct elections.[732] Amid the backdrop of the violence which followed the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Levant, the dichotomy between the *status quo* and chaos, strongly promoted by the state's rhetoric, has further consolidated, even at the level of some of the intellectuals who supported political liberalisation.[733] However this doesn't negate that, naturally, the 'majlis-style' informal system, in spite of the small size of the population, cannot possibly guarantee a comprehensive and truly inclusive opportunity for representation, with the poorer strata of the population and the furthest from the *loci* of power being especially neglected. This potentially creates some pockets of discontent and a political ground for the Islamists' rhetoric on wide-ranging political participations.[734] In fact, Islamist dissidents in the Gulf and their quintessentially political grievances, as thoroughly proven by Courtney Freer in *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies*, more strongly motivated by ideological questions of political legitimacy than by material demands, represent an exception to rentier state theory.[735] Arguably, it was this ideological dimension, together with the organizational capacity, that contributed to heighten the perceptions of the UAE government against al-Islah in the context of the 2011 activism.

All these different elements considered, it is worth reiterating the limited nature of the dissidence phenomenon in the UAE in 2011. The petitions represented the momentum of the events, and no major street protests have taken place in the country. The crackdown that the government launched in response may therefore appear disproportionate and the fact that it was focused on al-Islah is crucial in tying it back to the larger issue of government-Islamists relations. Overall, the 2011 events represented for the UAE leadership, first and foremost, an unwelcomed challenge to the *status quo*. If such challenge was of a small scale at the domestic level, it was thoroughly disruptive at the regional level. In fact,

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[732] "Local Views on Prospects for UAE Democratization," *Wikileaks*, 2004, http://wikileaks.wikimee.org/cable/2004/09/04ABUDHABI3210.html (accessed 5 June 2018).

[733] This was reiterated by several interviewees, including by three non-Emirati professors in UAE-based Universities interviewed by the author in Abu Dhabi on 15 April 2018.

[734] al-Zo'by and Başkan, "Discourse and oppositionality in the Arab Spring".

[735] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*.

many interviewees underlined that, in 2011, it was on the regional level that the Emirati leadership especially focused attention.[736] An Emirati diplomat interviewed by the author stated: 'The events of 2011 signalled the regionalization of national security for Abu Dhabi. There was a greater emphasis on proactive approaches to regional security, and not awaiting threats to reach the UAE's borders or internal space.'[737] Regional stability, in the face of the crumbling of the familiar *status quo*, with friendly regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen washed away, became a primary concern for the UAE leadership.[738] It was particularly evident in the UAE's reaction at events in Bahrain.

Already a couple of days after the start of the protests in Bahrain, on 18 February 2011, the then Foreign Minister of the UAE, Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, expressed support for the Bahraini leadership accusing Iran to infiltrate the opposition in Manama, adding: 'What is happening in Bahrain is going to have an impact on all GCC countries, and we must work together from now on'.[739] The UAE participated in several GCC meetings in the early days of March 2011, and Abu Dhabi was the only other member state, beyond Saudi Arabia, to commit ground personnel to a Peninsula Shield mission supporting the Bahraini regime's forces. While Saudi Arabia sent approximately 1.200 armoured forces, the UAE sent around 800 police officers who remained in the country for months.[740] This was a significant commitment, especially relative to that of Saudi Arabia, who had a vital interest in shutting down protests in Bahrain and who can count on a much larger security force. Moreover, the UAE joined Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar committing 20 billion US dollars to Oman and Bahrain, the two GCC countries most affected by socio-economic grievances pushing protests.[741] The political, military and economic resources committed by Abu Dhabi towards the GCC chapters of the Arab Spring, together with the proactive regional policy pursued

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[736] Interview of the author with one junior researcher at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Emirati official within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with an Emirati think tank director, Dubai, 17 April 2018; Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019.
[737] Interview of the author with an Emirati diplomat, London, 3 October 2018.
[738] Ibid.
[739] Quoted in Daniel Odinius and Philipp Kuntz, "The limits of authoritarian solidarity: The Gulf monarchies and preserving authoritarian rule during the Arab Spring", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 54, Issue 4, 24 March 2015, p. 642 (accessed 6 June 2018)
[740] Ibid., p. 642.
[741] Ibid.

in its aftermath, examined later, and in light of the small-scale nature of events within the UAE itself, are crucial in defining the impact of the 2011 events on the security calculus of the UAE leadership. From Abu Dhabi's viewpoint, the political order had shown its vulnerabilities, and these vulnerabilities could be easily leveraged by hostile players.

6.2 The UAE and the 'Shi'a threat'.

The UAE's perceptions of Iran and the threats it may pose via Shi'a proxies are informed by the history of bilateral engagement as much as by the nature of government-Shi'a relations within the Emirates, both conditioned by structural socio-political and socio-economic factors. The very limited internal dimension of such potential threats have produced multiple perspectives on the 'Shi'a issue', all contextualised in its external, regional dimension.

Amid the 1979 Islamic revolution, the leadership in the UAE shared with its neighbours some concerns that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's hegemonic ambitions would infer on their sovereignty.[742] Mirroring the perspective of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, experiencing unrest from their indigenous Shi'a communities in the 1980s, Abu Dhabi feared that Iran would encourage Emirati Shi'a to revolt against the government.[743] When an Iranian religious leader visited Dubai right after the revolution, local authorities detained and deported him.[744] In spite of this and other small incidents, the concerns were quieted when it became evident that the Emirati Shi'a communities were not restive against the ruling families or the state. In fact already in 1984, the revolutionary regime in Tehran even began building and financing religious institutions and charities in the UAE, including the Imam Hussein Mosque and an Iranian Hospital, for the sizable Iranian community in Dubai.[745] For years, imams at the Mosque have even been directly appointed by

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[742] Interview of the author with an Emirati official within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, Skype, 7 February 2019.
[743] "UAE Shi'a and their loyalties", *Wikileaks*, 15 April 2016, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ABUDHABI1471_a.html (accessed 12 June 2018)
[744] "Some Sheiks Are Now Shuddering," *Fort Scott Tribune*, 1 December 1979.
[745] "UAE Shi'a and their loyalties".

the Office of Iran's Supreme Leader.[746] While such choices are explained by Dubai's rulers consistently pragmatic approach towards Iran, trust in the loyalty of Shi'a citizens to the UAE state is a crucial factor to consider, too.

Although statistical data from official sources is not available, Shi'a citizens are estimated to represent approximately 15 percent of the UAE's population and live predominantly in the Northern Emirates. Emirati Shi'a citizens trace back their presence in the country at least since the mid-19th century: most migrated from Iran's Khuzistan province and others, to a lesser extent, from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and India.[747] Over time, governing authorities have pursued political strategies to provide these communities with a stake in the regime's stability, pushing a more inclusive attitude towards them.[748] For instance, state authorities have financed Shi'a mosques, attended Shi'a religious celebrations and engaged in a rhetoric to promote, with some success, harmonious Sunni-Shi'a relations.[749] The Emirates' Islamic studies curriculum is based exclusively on Sunni schools of thought, yet not openly discriminatory against Shi'a beliefs.[750] While the Ministry of Islamic Affairs issues unified Friday sermons to Sunni and Shi'a mosques alike, preachers of both sects are guaranteed some degree of discretionality.[751] Overall, while most Emirati Shi'a look to Iranian Ayatollahs in Qom as spiritual leaders, and only a fraction to religious authorities in Iraq, their national allegiance is generally considered to be to the UAE and many even judge Iran's political regime with hostility.[752] Hence, Iran is not considered in a position

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[746] Ibid.

[747] See estimate as referenced in Ahmed Majidyar, "Is sectarian balance in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar at risk?" *American Enterprise Institute*, 21 October 2013, http://www.aei.org/publication/is-sectarian-balance-in-the-united-arab-emirates-oman-and-qatar-at-risk, (accessed 12 June 2018) Alongside citizens, there are several Shi'a in the expat communities of Indian and Pakistani nationality.

[748] Christopher Davidson. "Sunni-Shiite Hostility: The UAE Suggests Otherwise." *Daily Star*, 2008.

[749] "Marasem-e Tasua-i Husseini dar Emaraat Bargozar Shod" [Tasua (Ninth of Muharram) Ceremonies for Hussein Were Held in Emirates], *Fars News Agency*, 5 December 2011, www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13900914000289.

[750] "United Arab Emirates 2012 International Religious Freedom Report*"*, US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, www.state.gov/documents/organization /208628.pdf. (accessed 12 June 2018).

[751] Ibid.

[752] Interview of the author with an Emirati think tank director, Dubai, 17 April 2018; Karim Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War", The Carnegie Papers, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2011, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai_iran.pdf, (accessed 12 June 2018)

to upset the UAE's domestic stability.[753] Many interviewees have contrasted the status of Emirati Shi'a as included in the national fabric with the institutionalised marginalization suffered by Shi'a communities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.[754] Similarly to the outlook in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, however, Shi'a do face some unofficial discrimination for positions deemed as sensitive, such as diplomatic posts or high-ranking posts within the armed forces and state security.[755]

By contrast the level of economic inclusiveness of the communities is, on average, high. For example some Shi'a families belong to the country's rich merchant elites and run some of the biggest business conglomerates in Dubai such as Alfardan, Al Sayegh, Galadari, and Al Yousuf LLC. Dubai has also traditionally provided concrete economic opportunities to its large Iranian community, including over half of the 250,000 Iranians residing in the UAE, per government estimates.[756] Indeed, in 2010, an estimated 8,000 Iranian businesses operated in Dubai, with over 400 of them being members of the Dubai-based Iranian Business Council.[757] These businesses were heavily involved into exporting and re-exporting goods with Iran, a very profitable trade for the entire UAE and particularly for Dubai. Consequently, they were greatly affected by international sanctions imposed by the United States in 2009 and then by the European Union in 2012 against Iran as part of punitive measures for Tehran's nuclear programme.[758]

However, after 2011 the UAE became less hospitable for the Iranian business community, with many experiencing difficulties to buy property, receive loans,

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[753] Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019
[754] Interview of the author with an Emirati think tank director, Dubai, 17 April 2018; Interview of the author with one European professor of international relations at a UAE-based University, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with one North American professor of international relations at a UAE-based University, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018.
[755] "UAE Shi'a and their loyalties", *Wikileaks*
[756] Roland Marchal, "Dubai: Global City and Transnational Hub," in Madawi al‑Rasheed, ed., *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 93–110.
[757] Simon Kerr and Roula Khalaf, "Dubai: Closing the Back Door," *Financial Times*, 13 July 2010, www.ft.com/intl/cms /s/0/4cda158e-8eb1-11df-8a67-00144feab49a.html#axzz2f4 Tsu7yK, (accessed 12 June 2018)
[758] Terry Atlas and Dana El Baltaji "Kerry Says U.A.E. Trade With Iran Plunges 83% on Sanctions" *Bloomberg News*, 11 November 2013, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-11-11/kerry-says-u-a-e-trade-with-iran-plunges-83-on-sanctions.html (accessed 12 June 2018)

and extend residence permits.[759] Moreover, as a consequence of Iran's perceived support for the Bahraini opposition during the Arab Spring, the Iranian and Lebanese diaspora in the UAE started to be viewed with more suspicion by Emirati federal authorities. In July 2013, the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee said the Emirati government had deported 500 Iranian nationals that year.[760] In addition, around the same time, the UAE authorities also expelled thousands of the about 100,000 Lebanese living in the country.[761] In the same context, increased vigilance was also exercised on Emirati Shi'a and they were subject to limited and temporary restrictions, such as on hosting an international Shi'a summit.[762] However the limited nature of restrictions and the fact that monitoring activities were escalated over all national communities, once again indicated that the Emirati Shi'a communities were not perceived as sources of a specific threat by the leadership.

The threat was instead long perceived, especially in Abu Dhabi, in Iran's regional activities.[763] The - conflictual - incipit of the bilateral relations remains a relevant element in these regards. In 1971, just as British forces withdrew from the Trucial States, Iran's Shah occupied three small but strategically located islands in the Gulf that were meant to become jointly administered by Iran and the Emirate of Sharjah.[764] The three islands, Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb, had indeed been under Sharjah's administration during the British protectorate, since the 1920s. The issue was broader as many Iranians regarded the UAE as an illegitimate British creation.[765] Since Iran's capture of the islands, the UAE has attempted direct bilateral negotiations as well as bringing the dispute to the International Court of Justice and the United Nations, all to no avail.[766] The

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[759] Karim Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai."
[760] Ikhraj-e 500 Irani az Emarat" [Expulsion of 500 Iranians from Emirates], *Tabnak*, 7 July 2013
[761] "Report: UAE to Expel Some 1,000 Lebanese Expats," *Naharnet*, 5 June 2012, www.naharnet.com/stories/en/42441.
[762] "United Arab Emirates 2012 International Religious Freedom Report".
[763] Interview of the author with a senior professor at the National Defense College of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, 16 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Emirati political scientist close to the leadership, London, 4 October 2018.
[764] Dan Caldwell. "Flashpoints in the Gulf: Abu Musa and the Tunb islands." *Middle East Policy* 4.3 (1996): pp. 50-57.
[765] Christopher Davidson, "The United Arab Emirates", in Davidson (ed.) *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf monarchies*, p. 10
[766] On the issue of the Gulf islands, see three linked articles in Potter and Sick, eds, *Security in the Persian Gulf*: Jalil Roshandel, "On the Persian Gulf Islands: An Iranian Perspective"; Hassan H. Al-Alkim, "The Islands Question: An Arabian Perspective" and

question has remained a cause of friction between the two states over the decades, appearing in almost every GCC Communiqués, and still may provide a relevant case studies on bilateral relations in contemporary times. In fact, as Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in 2013 expressed the intention to improve Tehran's relations with its neighbours, he promptly suggested to 'talk to the UAE and remove any misunderstanding about the islands'.[767] Interestingly the idea was dismissed by IRGC's Major General Mohammad Jafari, arguing that the issue was a matter of national security, not up for negotiations.[768] This disagreement provides a window into the strategic significance of the islands for Iran, where Iranian military personnel is stationed, which is widely acknowledged in the UAE. Expressing an argument common to several interviewees, a senior researcher in an Abu Dhabi-based think tank stated to the author: 'These islands are important for one thing only, their geostrategic position. Look at a map, they are Iran's lock to close the Strait of Hormuz, a major geostrategic asset for a wanna-be hegemonic power.'[769] Although perennial Iranian threats to close the Strait never materialised, Iran's presence in Abu Musa allows Tehran to control a shipping route through which passes a fifth of the world's oil supplies, while also projecting additional protection the major Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, hosting energy and military infrastructures.[770]

As shown by leaked US diplomatic cables from 2009, the UAE leaders have long viewed Iran as a predatory power, and through such lenses they perceived its nuclear ambitions, with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan describing Iran's willingness to acquire a nuclear deterrent as an instrument to become a superpower and pursue the re-establishment of 'a Persian empire in

Richard Schofield, "Anything but Black and White: A Commentary on the Lower Gulf Islands Dispute.", (Palgrave Macmillan US), 2002.

[767] "Dialogue on Abu Musa; country's 'normal position,' Zarif says", *MEHR News Agency*, 2 December 2013, https://en.mehrnews.com/news/100921/Dialogue-on-Abu-Musa-country-s-normal-position-Zarif-says, (accessed 12 June 2018)

[768] "UAE must know that Iran's sovereignty over Persian Gulf islands "non-negotiable"", *Real Iran*, 3 December 2017, http://realiran.org/uae-must-know-that-irans-sovereignty-over-persian-gulf-islands-non-negotiable/ (accessed 12 June 2018)

[769] Interview of the author with a senior professor at the National Defence College of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, 16 April 2018.

[770] Stephanie Cronin and Nur Masalha. "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC states: revolution to realpolitik?" Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, 17. London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011, p.27.

the 21st century' and 'emirates' in the Muslim world.[771] In the same conversations the Crown Prince further stated that Iran had 'emirates' equipped with financial and military resources in South Lebanon (via Hezbollah) and Gaza (via Hamas) and Southern Iraq, 'sleeper emirates' in Kuwait, Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and potentially another one in Saada (via the Houthis).[772] It was clear from Abu Dhabi's political and military reactions that the 2011 protests in Bahrain were perceived in this context. In 2015, it became even clearer to which lengths Abu Dhabi was willing to go to counter what they perceived as Iranian plans in Yemen. Amid the strengthening of relations between Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and the Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman, entering Riyadh's palaces in 2015, the UAE's posture against Iran turned more hawkish. The strategic alliance joined forces in military operations in Yemen in March 2015, against the perceived attempt of Iran to control the country via the Houthis, a rebel force that, taking advantage of the post-Arab Spring vacuum of power, between 2014 and 2015 conquered much of the country including the capital Sanaa.[773] While the UAE's military operations initially focused on fighting jihadi groups in the south of the country, the government also devoted military and diplomatic resources against the Houthis.[774] An official from the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs interviewed by the author endorsed the narrative by arguing: 'The UAE is in Yemen because Iran is in Yemen'. [775]

The signing of the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran in July 2015 was received amid this background in Abu Dhabi, and in a close alignment with the perceptions of the Bahraini and Saudi leadership. In fact, while the UAE Foreign Minister al-Nahyan visited Iran days after the nuclear deal, he became a vocal opponent of the deal in the following months, arguing that Tehran was exploiting the good faith of the international community and the financial resources provided by the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions to fund destabilising activities in the

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[771] "Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Warns DOE DepSec Poneman about Iran," *WikiLeaks*, 17 December 2009, http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/12/09ABUDHABI1151.html, (accessed 12 June 2018)
[772] Ibid.
[773] Hokayem and Roberts. "The War in Yemen."
[774] Ibid.
[775] Interview of the author with an Emirati official within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail, 19 May 2018.

region.[776] On the first anniversary of the JCPOA signing, the UAE Ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, wrote an article again accusing Iran of creating instability in the region, arguing that 'Iran sees it as an opportunity to increase hostilities in the region'.[777] The same attitude has been attributed to Sharjah, the UAE's most conservative Emirate, which is often closely aligned with Riyadh on Iran-related matters.[778] On the contrary, aforementioned economic considerations have largely driven a different reaction in Dubai, Iran's most important regional trade partner and, to a certain extent in Ras Al Khaimah, also entertaining good commercial relations with Iran.[779] Viewing Iran through a pragmatic commercial lens, Dubai officials believe that it was in their best interest to secure their flourishing economic relations through accommodation of Iran rather than outright confrontation and the JCPOA, with the removal of international nuclear-related sanctions, was deemed useful to that purpose. Asked if it was time to lift sanctions against Iran, after the 2013 interim nuclear agreement, the ruler of Dubai Shaykh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum stated: 'I think so and give Iran a space… Iran is our neighbour and we don't want any problem… everybody will benefit.' [780]

Considering the numerous elements in the multidimensional relations between the UAE and Iran, especially in its most contemporary evolutions, unpacking the UAE leadership's security perceptions vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic and systematising them through this thesis' theoretical framework is a complex exercise. Taking into account the views in Abu Dhabi - the capital, the biggest and wealthiest Emirate of the federation, in charge of foreign and security policies

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[776] Quoted in Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms." in Almezaini and Rickli (eds), *The Small Gulf States*, pp. 99-116.

[777] "One Year After the Iran Nuclear Deal – Op-Ed by Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba" by Yousef Al Otaiba appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on 3 April 2016, and is available on the website of the UAE Embassy in Washington DC at http://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/one-year-after-iran-nuclear-deal-%E2%80%93-op-ed-ambassador-yousef-al-otaiba (accessed 12 June 2018)

[778] In an interview with the author conducted via Skype on 7 February 2019, a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs highlighted that: 'The al-Qasimi family belongs to the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, a school that is closer to the doctrine followed to the royal family of Saudi Arabia than to the Maliki school followed elsewhere in the UAE. This is one of the factors that granted Saudi Arabia a significant influence over some of the Qasimi-ruled Emirates'.

[779] Giorgio Cafiero and Joshua Hodge, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Gulf Littoral States", *LobeLog*, 22 June 2016, https://lobelog.com/the-saudi-iranian-rivalry-and-the-gulf-littoral-states/, (accessed 12 June 2018).

[780] Quoted in Cafiero and Hodge, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Gulf Littoral States"

– and its *de facto* leader, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed, it is possible to argue that Iran is perceived as a threat, but of a quintessentially external nature. There is very limited concern that Iran may be challenging the regime's stability from within the Emirates, via the expat or the local Shi'a communities. The preoccupation, heightened after the Arab Spring and its aftermath, is with Iran's capability to threaten the stability, identity, borders and functional integrity of the regional order.[781] Beyond this political dimension, this threat also has a military dimension, in the form of direct confrontations between the Houthis – considered an Iranian proxy – and the UAE armed forces in Yemen as well as the threat of ballistic missiles – allegedly provided by Iran to the Houthis – that may be launched against the UAE.[782] The scenarios of Iran capturing further UAE islands such as Ariana and Zarkooh, claimed as Iranian territories by the Deputy Chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission in 2016, or of an Iranian strike against US military bases in the UAE in retaliation for a US military operation against Iran are, at times, raised.[783] Interestingly, Iran is not often described as a threat to societal stability: it is a widely shared idea that alienating Arab Shi'a is a policy choice and societal harmony can be repaired by renouncing that choice and enacting inclusive policies instead.[784] Finally, as viewed from the perspective of the UAE decision-makers, Iran does not appear to be necessarily considered a threat to domestic or international economic interests. On the contrary, better relations with Iran are considered an economic opportunity, especially in Dubai and, to a certain extent, Ras al-Khaimah.[785]

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[781] Interview of the author with a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, Skype, 7 February 2019; Interview of the author with one senior researcher at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018.

[782] Interview of the author with a senior professor and a senior analyst at the National Defence College of the United Arab Emirates, 16 April 2018.

[783] Interview of the author with an Emirati diplomat, London, 3 October 2018.

[784] Interview of the author with a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, Skype, 7 February 2019; Interview of the author with an Emirati think tank director, 17 April 2018.

[785] Interview of the author with one European professor of international relations at a UAE-based University, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with one North American professor of international relations at a UAE-based University, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018.

6.3 The UAE and the 'Islamist threat'.

The perceptions of the UAE leadership around the Arab Spring, both at a domestic and regional level, were largely impacted by its perceptions of political Islam, particularly as embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, including al-Islah. The history of the relations between the UAE government and the Islamists before 2011 is crucial to highlight the reasons why political Islam was the focus of the UAE's attention in the context of the intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017. At the domestic level, Islamists have been perceived to leverage the state's vulnerabilities in a way that threatened the integrity and functioning of the UAE Federation and Abu Dhabi's undisputed leadership of it. This alleged agenda is also perceived as part and parcel of a region-wide strategy, in a full overlap between the regional and domestic domains of security.

Individuals from the Muslim Brotherhood were present within the Emirates even prior to the formation of the UAE: in fact, many of the teachers that the rulers of the various Emirates recruited for their nascent schooling systems in the 1960s were Egyptian Brotherhood members fleeing from anti-Islamist President Nasser.[786] The society *Jamiyyat Al-Islah* (Society of Reform) was formed shortly after independence, in 1974, and has had some kind of existence in the Emirate since.[787] It initially received support from some of the UAE leaders, including donations from Dubai's ruler Shaykh Rashid al-Maktoum to build the organization's headquarter in Dubai and branches in Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah, and land from Abu Dhabi's ruler Shaykh Zayed al-Nahyan.[788] This initial attitude has been interpreted as a sign of the government's intent to patronise the Islamist group as a bulwark against the ideology of Arab nationalism that, in those years, was publicly attacking the legitimacy of the GCC rulers for their alliance with the West.[789] Indeed, Shaykh Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Maktoum was the first Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Society in Dubai. Interestingly, the society didn't initially open branches in Sharjah, which allegedly registered a socio-cultural predominance of Arab nationalism and pan-Arab sentiments.[790] In

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[786] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policy-making*. (London: Routledge), 2016, p. 73
[787] Ulrichsen. *The United Arab Emirates,* p. 74
[788] Ibid.
[789] See for instance: Freer, *Rentier Islamism*, 2018
[790] Mansur al-Noqaidan, 'Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi al-Imarat: Al-Tamaddad wa-l-Inhisar' (The Muslim Brotherhood in the Emirates: Expansion and Decline), in Al-Ikhwan al-

these early days, not dissimilarly than what took place in other GCC countries, al-Islah focused on social, educational and cultural activities. In 1978 the society founded its main publication, itself called *al-Islah*, through which it disseminated conservative Islamic values and calls to defend the Islamic identity against cultural contamination both from leftist ideologies such as pan-Arabism and, later, Western liberalism.[791] In the first decades of its existence, education and socio-cultural activities were also the focus of Islah's interactions with the state. Saeed Abdullah Salman, a founding member of the society, was the UAE's first Minister for Housing in 1971 and then Ministry of Education and Chancellor of the UAE University in 1979.[792] Another member, Mohammed Abdel-Rahman al-Bakr, became Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs and Endowments in 1977.[793] Crucially, Sultan bin Kayed al-Qasimi, the same person who would then head the society and be arrested after 2011, was head of the Curriculum Division in the UAE for seven consecutive years, from 1977 to 1983, a position that could impact the strategic direction of the education system. From such positions of influence, al-Islah managed to have a deep impact, in a conservative direction, on the UAE's educational policy, and, via the students' unions and the organization of youth activities, a large influence on Emirati youth. Ultimately such level of influence, together with increasingly politicized Friday sermons, attracted the authorities' attention and concerns since the end of the 1980s, at the same time as the need to contrast the pan-Arab leftist ideological challenge had become less pressing.

In 1994, the UAE government dissolved al-Islah's Board of Directors and replaced its members with government appointees to make it less autonomous, while the society's branches in Dubai and Fujairah, as well as the Guidance Society in Ajman, were forced to reduce their domestic and foreign activities.[794] The Ras al-Khaimah branch escaped such provisions due to the protection provided by then Emirate's ruler Saqr al-Qasimi, considered sympathetic to the organization.[795] The government's actions stemmed from a series of

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Muslimun fi al Khalij (The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf), ed. by Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2012), p. 61

[791] Ibid.

[792] Ulrichsen. *The United Arab Emirates,* p. 75

[793] Ibid.

[794] Mansur al-Noqaidan, 'Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi al-Imarat: Al-Tamaddad wa-l-Inhisar', p. 80

[795] David Roberts. "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring." *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017), p.555

considerations. The leadership strategy for the country's development included major economic and cultural liberalizations which started to take place since the late 1990s, and run contrary to the Brotherhood ideology: the leadership wanted to turn the UAE into a modern economy, largely influenced by Western models of multiculturalism and globalization. In addition to that, the 1994 crackdown is often related to an investigation by Egyptian security services dated early 1990s, claiming that donations from Islah's Committee for Relief and Outside Activities had been sent to individuals involved with the Egyptian extremist organization Islamic Jihad.[796] The prevailing argument in the Emirati media became that al-Islah had pledged the oath of *bay'a* (or loyalty) to the Brotherhood's General Guide in Egypt and so was by used by the international Muslim Brotherhood to further its pan-Islamist cause, the establishment of a single Islamic state.[797]

Although al-Islah members in the UAE argue that, while they share a similar ideology with the Brotherhood in Egypt, they are not directly linked to it, the UAE government consistently argued that the two movements are linked financially and politically to the international Muslim Brotherhood movement and even encouraged from abroad to engage in clandestine activities.[798] In particular senior members of the Abu Dhabi ruling family, including Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed, since 2004 the *de facto* leader of the country, and his brothers Hamdan bin Zayed (Deputy Prime Minister), and Hazza bin Zayed (State Security Department Director) have consistently referred to Islah members as the 'standard bearers for an essentially foreign ideology.'[799] Additionally, as the UAE authorities have long drawn an ideological connection between the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi groups, the crackdown on al-Islah worsened in the early 2000s, after the 9/11 attacks, when it emerged that two of the nineteen hijackers

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[796] Ibid.

[797] Interview with Dr. Ebtesam al-Ketbi quoted in Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism*, p. 493.

[798] See: Sultan Saoud Al Qassemi, 'The Brothers and the Gulf', *Foreign Policy*, 14 December 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/14/Muslim_Brotherhood_Gulf_UAE_Qassemi (accessed 12 June 2018); "Gulf states must tackle Muslim Brotherhood threat: UAE". *Reuters*, 8 October 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-brotherhood/gulf-states-must-tackle-muslim-brotherhood-threat-uae-idUSBRE8970SD20121008 (accessed 12 June 2018); Simon Kerr, "UAE puts 94 on trial in crackdown on Islamist dissent", *Financial Times*, 4 March 2013.

[799] "UAE minimizing influence of Islamic extremists", *Wikileaks*, 10 November 2004, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUDHABI4061_a.html (accessed 6 June 2018).

were Emirati citizens.[800] As a result, in the early 2000s, over 250 people linked to al-Islah were arrested or removed from their positions within the state institutions or bureaucracy, educational institutions or civil society organizations.[801] In a 2004 meeting with US officials, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed noted that 40 Emiratis with links to al-Islah had been temporarily removed from the UAE security forces and subjected to a form of re-education before being reintegrated.[802] In that meeting he stated: 'We are having a (culture) war with the Muslim Brotherhood in this country,' openly referring to the Islamists' opposition to governmental reforms to education, society and economy.[803] This opposition worked to fuel fears that such changes will threaten the Emirati identity and betray traditional Islamic values: by blaming government policies of undermining those, Islamists also indirectly undermined one of the elements of the regime's political legitimacy, its Islamic credentials.

Mohammad bin Zayed, at first sympathetic to political Islam himself but subsequently educated in military colleges such as Sandhurst in the United Kingdom, is largely thought to have a strong personal hostility against political Islam and an inflated perception of their political strength and subversive intent.[804] These insights into the perceptions of one the major source of policy-making in the country can be crucial to unpacking the larger issue. In 2006 he was recorded again in a US diplomatic cable stating that 'if there were an election [in the UAE] tomorrow, the Muslim Brotherhood would take over.'[805] This consideration appears inconsistent with the small numbers of Islah members and sympathisers in the country, and only if looking exclusively at the Northern Emirates Islah appears to have a more meaningful presence.[806] Crucially, the bulk of Brotherhood activists and supporters were located there, where economic inequality with respect to the other Emirates is stark, and the average per capita

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[800] Interview of the author with two researchers at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019

[801] Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates,* p. 77

[802] "UAE minimizing influence of Islamic extremists", *Wikileaks*.

[803] Ibid.

[804] Roberts, "Mosque and State".

[805] "Townsend discusses regional stability, counterterrorism with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince", *Wikileaks*, 29 April 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ABUDHABI1724_a.html, (accessed 12 June 2018)

[806] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*.

GDP is less than a third of that in Abu Dhabi.[807] This structural socio-economic vulnerability provides political ammunition for al-Islah to argue against the effectiveness of Abu Dhabi as the leader of the Federation, even more so that the Brotherhood historically takes advantage of political and economic inequalities as political arguments 'stressing a divine mandate to bridge them'.[808] Even more worryingly, as mentioned, was that the Emir of the Northern Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, Saud bin Saqr al-Qasimi, has long had links to the organization, shielding the local branch from the crackdowns of the 1990s and 2000s, even when in direct opposition and defiance to Abu Dhabi's provisions, and having contacts with symbols of Islamist movements worldwide.[809] Interestingly, many of the signatories of the 2011 petitions belonged to Ras Al Khaimah's largest tribe.[810] These factors arguably amplified Abu Dhabi's leaders already hyper-vigilant perception of al-Islah as targeting the integrity and functioning of the UAE Federation and Abu Dhabi's undisputed leadership of it.

Such long-standing hostility of the Emirati regime towards the Brotherhood mounted between the end of 2011 and 2012, when Brotherhood affiliates tried to seize the political opportunities offered by the Arab Spring. As mentioned, al-Islah members were involved in the dissidence demonstrations in the UAE itself. Al-Islah was labeled as a terrorist organization and branches in Dubai, Fujairah and Ras Al-Khaimah were effectively dismantled in 2012.[811] Attorney General Ali Salim al-Tunaiji announced 'the country's national security was under threat from a group of people with ties to foreign organizations and agendas', a clear reference to the international Muslim Brotherhood.[812] The Emirati media, firmly under government control, reported that some of those detained had confessed that their organization was running an armed wing and had been plotting to take

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[807] The argument that the internal inequalities in the balance of political and economic power in the Emirates makes the poorer Emirates more vulnerable to Islamist rhetoric is convincingly made in: Roberts. "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring."

[808] al-Zo'by and Başkan, "Discourse and oppositionality in the Arab Spring."

[809] Yara Bayoumy, "UAE Islamist group had no desire to topple government: families", *Reuters*, 2 July 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-trial-islah-idUSBRE9610PT20130702 (accessed 12 June 2018)

[810] Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019.

[811] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*, p. 490

[812] Ian Black, "Emirati Nerves Rattled by Islamists' Rise," *The Guardian*, 12 October 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2012/oct/12/uae-muslimbrotherhood-egypt-arabspring (accessed 12 June 2018)

power and establish an Islamist state.[813] During the GCC National and Regional Security Conference run by the Bahrain Centre for Strategic, International and Energy Studies in January 2012, Dubai police chief General Dahi Khalfan stated: 'Allow me to deviate from diplomatic speech; I am a security man. The Muslim Brotherhood is a security threat to the Gulf, and is no less dangerous than Iran.'[814] While these positions appear unjustified by the small number of Brotherhood sympathisers in the UAE, in the words of an Emirati diplomat: 'Islah sympathisers might be few in the UAE, if compared with Kuwait or Egypt, but they were in excellent and influential positions, from where they could easily push their political agenda for the region, in coordination with the other groups in the region, such as in Egypt and Kuwait.' [815] The perspective is indeed different when looking at the regional picture post-2011, as Brotherhood-affiliates were ascending to government in Egypt and Tunisia and enjoying rising popularity and battlefield victories in Libya, Syria and Yemen.[816] These developments triggered a far-reaching reaction on behalf of Abu Dhabi, that, since 2013, substantially supported on the ground, logistically and financially, the anti-Islamist coalition in Libya and the military-led, anti-Islamist government in Egypt both domestically and internationally.[817] Along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the UAE generously financed the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, once it ousted the Islamist-led government of Mohammed Morsi. In Libya, the UAE developed relations with the Zintan Brigades and the Libyan National Army forces under the command of General Khalifa Haftar, even assisting militarily in operations against Islamist opponents in 2014.[818]

Indeed, by considering the unprecedented level of UAE engagement to counter Brotherhood expansion regionally, the full-scale response of the UAE government to domestic Islamist dissent, the rhetoric coming from the authorities

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[813] Interview of the author with a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, Skype, 7 February 2019; Interview of the author with two researchers at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with a senior professor at the National Defence College of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, 16 April 2018.
[814] "Dubai Police Chief Warns of Muslim Brotherhood, Iran Threat," *Reuters*, 26 July 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-police-brotherhood/dubai-police-chief-warns-of-muslim-brotherhood-iran-threat (accessed 6 June 2019).
[815] Interview of the author with an Emirati diplomat, London, 3 October 2018.
[816] Khalil Al-Anani. "Islamist parties post-Arab spring." *Mediterranean Politics* 17.3 (2012): pp. 466-472.
[817] Roberts. "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring."
[818] Ibid.

addressing the issue, it is possible to confirm the strict interrelation between the domestic and regional level in the security perception of the leadership viewing political Islam as a proper intermestic threat. A threat originated from - and linked to - the regional Muslim Brotherhood, but with an internal relevance. The threat perception has a clear-cut political dimension, as the Brotherhood is treated as posing a direct danger to the regime's stability. While the scarce number of supporters in the UAE and the tough repressive response of the government would suggest that al-Islah is hardly capable of threatening the existence of the state, there are elements to argue that al-Islah is thought to be capable of exploiting what could arguably be the country's main socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities, the unequal balance of power amongst the seven Emirates. In addition to the political aspect, the anti-modernization, anti-globalisation and anti-Westernization stances of al-Islah, add an economic and social dimension to the threat perceived. Even a relative empowerment could be damaging for the UAE's globalized economy, in particular for Dubai, whose wealth largely depends from its internationalization.[819] In an interview with the author in London, an Emirati diplomat stated that: 'The Brotherhood is an obstacle to our plans for further economic development in the country'.[820] By challenging the modernization pushed by the government in various aspects of societal development, the organization is also thought to have the potential, on the long term, to disrupt social cohesiveness, by pitting more conservative Emiratis against the more globalised local elites.

6.4 The UAE and the 'jihadi threat'.

When analysing the Emirati leadership's perceptions of jihadi organizations, it is paramount to make a distinction between the internal and external level of the phenomenon. While internally the political dimension seems very limited, and the social and economic dimensions more pronounced, externally jihadi groups are confronted as a strong threat to the the UAE leadership's political interests in relation to the regional order.

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[819] Jim Krane. *City of gold: Dubai and the dream of capitalism*. (London: Macmillan), 2009
[820] Interview of the author with an Emirati diplomat, London, 3 October 2018.

The watershed moment clearly appears to be the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, a close ally and security provider of the UAE. An American expert on GCC affairs, who has long worked close to high-ranking Emirati officials, has stated in a 2019 interview with the author: 'Being close to the US is the basis of the UAE's national security strategy. The events of 9/11 were a true shock for the Emirati leadership and they since took a maximalist approach to cut any even remote connection between their country and jihadi groups.'[821] A number of elements triggered a change in the government's approach: two of the nineteen terrorists that perpetrated the attack had Emirati citizenship, more than half of the hijackers flew directly out of Dubai to the United States and it emerged that the UAE banking system had been used by hijackers to launder funds.[822] These elements risked seriously damaging US-UAE relations, with long-lasting potential implications for the UAE's security. In 2006 the substantial damage to the reputation and image of the UAE and in particular Dubai, had meaningful economic repercussions when the state-owned DP World had to drop a bid to manage terminal operations at six major American ports amid strong opposition in the US Congress.[823] Subsequently, the perceptions of the Emirati leadership vis-à-vis jihadi organizations changed on several fronts including the ideological and material aspect, the domestic as well as external dimension.

At the external, regional level, the UAE exerted efforts to build an image of itself as a reliable ally for the United States, especially since the 'War on Terror' was launched by then American President George W. Bush in the aftermath of 9/11. The UAE was the only Arab country to commit troops in Afghanistan in 2011 and in 2014 Emirati forces have been taking active part in military operations carried out by the US-led international coalition against Daesh in Syria as well as against both Daesh and AQAP in southern Yemen in the context of the Saudi-led military operations.[824] Along with the Yemeni groups trained and funded by the UAE, the Emirati military ejected AQAP from the port city of Mukalla in April 2016 and from

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[821] Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019
[822] John Roth, Douglas Greenburg, Serena Wille, "Monograph on Terrorist Financing", Staff Report to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/911_TerrFin_Monograph.pdf, 2004, p. 26 (accessed 14 June 2018)
[823] David Sangermarch, "Under Pressure, Dubai Company Drops Port Deal", *The New York Times*, 10 March 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/10/politics/under-pressure-dubai-company-drops-port-deal.html, (accessed 14 June 2018)
[824] Hokayem and Roberts. "The War in Yemen."

the coastal towns of Balhaf and Bir Ali in December of the same year. Both UAE forces and UAE-backed Yemeni forces conducted counterterrorism operations in the whole territory of southern Yemen even after 2016. These military operations can be considered substantial relatively to the country's size and military might, and the commitment even more interesting given how nor Afghanistan, Syria or Yemen share borders with the UAE. This commitment was frequently explained in interviews through the progressive regionalization of the Emirati leadership's perspective on security and the willingness to prevent jihadi groups from threatening the stability of the regional political order, especially where favourable to the UAE.[825] In addition such a proactive policy was also motivated by its potential to strengthen relations with the region's offshore balancer, the US, as well as a regional leader, Saudi Arabia, to whom jihadi groups pose a much fiercer and pressing threat.[826]

By contrast, at the domestic level, the UAE has been consistently assessed as not highly vulnerable to the threat of jihadi terrorism.[827] Overall, international organizations have estimated that the UAE is one of the countries exporting a smaller number of foreign fighters to Daesh in Syria and Iraq.[828] This is due to a strict counterterrorism legislation, a strongly securitarian approach by authorities to policing society, an ideological effort to counter jihadi discourse and ideology, an economic affluence that discourages self-immolation. Groups such as al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have long been designated as terrorist entities by the UAE, in a list that is periodically updated and since 2014 contains over 80 organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra,

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[825] Interview of the author with a senior professor and a senior analyst at the National Defence College of the United Arab Emirates, 16 April 2018
[826] Interview of the author with a senior analyst at the National Defence College of the United Arab Emirates, 16 April 2018; Interview of the author with one European professor of international relations at a UAE-based University, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018.
[827] See for instance: "Country Profile: United Arab Emirates" Library of Congress – Federal Research Division, United States, July 2007; Ragab, "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS"; Meda Al Rowas, "Islamic State Threat in GCC States," IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor 16, no. 2 (February 2016).
[828] See Benmelech and Klor. "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?"; Peter R Neumann, 'Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s', *ICSR*, 26 January 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-nowexceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/ (accessed 12 June 2018).

and these group's affiliates.[829] Counterterrorism laws have been particularly strict in the country since the early 2000s and have been made even stricter after the consolidation of Daesh in 2014.[830] Legislation allows extensive degree of surveillance to state security forces and harsh precautionary measures including jail time for promoting terrorist organizations verbally or in writing, including on social media. Since 2014-2015 capital punishment is given for terrorism offences while the UAE also passed a law criminalizing hate speech, the defamation of religion and discrimination. Such laws have been extensively applied, including to pursue cases unrelated to jihadi organizations but against political dissidents and activists.[831]

Alongside the legal instruments, the Emirati government has been active in countering jihadist ideology. The Abu Dhabi ruling family itself has long embraced the Sunni Maliki school of thought, substantially different from more fundamentalist strands of Islam. In the aftermath of 9/11, however, the federal government showed an urgency to openly contrast the more fundamentalist interpretations.[832] Monitoring activities of mosques, as well as the efforts to deliver pre-approved sermons for Friday prayers, were stepped up. A number of clerics who were found to deliver sermons inciting violence were sent to re-education programs.[833] Islam teachers and curricula for the Arabic and Islamic Studies courses were reformed removing more radical ideas. Political and religious authorities, including officials from the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Awqaf, Dubai's ruler and UAE's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Rashid, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the Minister of International Cooperation Abdullah bin Zayed have consistently condemned extremism, at times almost competing to sponsor *ad hoc* events or initiatives.[834] Since 2012 the UAE also hosts a centre for excellence in capacity

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[829] "List of groups designated terrorist organisations by the UAE", *The National*, 16 November 2014, https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/list-of-groups-designated-terrorist-organisations-by-the-uae-1.270037 (accessed 14 June 2018)
[830] See the "Country Reports on Terrorism", the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2004 – 2016, available at https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm (accessed 14 June 2018)
[831] "United Arab Emirates" in World Report 2017, *Human Rights Watch*, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates (accessed 14 June 2018)
[832] Fatma Al-Sayegh , "Post-9/11 changes in the Gulf : the case of the UAE" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 11 (Summer 2004), pp. 107-124
[833] Ibid.
[834] Ibid.

building programs for countering violent extremism and de-radicalisation practices, named Hedayah, which, however, carries on very limited work within the Emirates.[835] In July 2015, the US and UAE joined forces in establishing the Sawab Center, a body within the framework of the Global Coalition against Daesh, specialising in countering jihadi propaganda online, particularly on social media.[836] While the actual effects of these counter-narrative approaches remain under-researched, these state-sponsored activities can be particularly relevant in countries where social media usage is very high and the Internet in general has been proven to be an effective tool for radicalisation.[837]

At home, the UAE has never experienced a major attack at the hands of jihadi terrorist organizations. Only one episode, allegedly perpetrated by a Daesh-inspired lone wolf took place in 2014. In December of that year Ala'a Badr Abdullah al-Hashimi murdered an American kindergarten teacher in the Al Reem shopping center in Abu Dhabi and subsequently attempted to detonate a bomb outside the home of an American doctor.[838] Two days later, authorities identified and arrested her and she was sentenced to the capital punishment. While the woman apparently did not have links to terrorist organizations, she was self-radicalised online through Daesh material. While this was the only episode that actually took place, others were prevented by the authorities. A few months after this event, al-Hashemi's husband, Mohammed al-Habashi, was also sentenced to life in prison for a string of terrorist offenses, including plotting to blow up Yas Marina Circuit and a local IKEA store.[839] Overall, according to official data, 2016 was a very active year in terrorism prosecutions as the Federal Supreme Court's State Security Court heard more than three dozen terrorism-related cases, including alleged affiliates of Daesh, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah, involving both locals and foreigners.[840] One of the most

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[835] Interview of the author with a senior member of staff in Hedayah, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018.
[836] Ragab, "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS."
[837] Ibid.
[838] "UAE woman executed over killing of American teacher in Abu Dhabi", *The Guardian*, 13 July 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/13/uae-woman-executed-over-killing-of-american-teacher-in-abu-dhabi, (accessed 14 June 2018)
[839] "Man charged with terrorist plot to bomb 2014 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix F1 Race", *Autoweek*, 29 December 2015, http://autoweek.com/article/formula-one/man-charged-terrorist-plot-bomb-2014-abu-dhabi-grand-prix-f1-race (accessed 14 June 2018).
[840] See the "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016", the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, available at https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm (accessed 14 June 2018)

relevant cases involved 41 defendants, 38 of whom were Emirati, who received sentences ranging from six months to death for forming a terrorist organization called Shabab al-Manara, with ties to Daesh and al-Qa'ida, and planning terrorist attacks in the UAE.[841]

On the other hand, as mentioned, in the aftermath of 9/11 it emerged that terrorist groups had used the UAE as a financial transit hub.[842] The government's reaction was initially slow and 'operational capability constraints and political considerations' have been repeatedly cited in US Bureau of Counterterrorism's Country Reports on Terrorism as preventing the government from immediately freezing and confiscating terrorists' assets.[843] In particular the implementation of the strictest anti-money laundering standards has been evaluated insufficient in special circumstances such as in the context of free trade zones, licensed exchange houses, *hawalas*, and trading firms acting as money transmitters. Charities have instead been put under the supervision of the authorities, who actively work to channel donations through legal charities.[844] The UAE over the years acquired membership of several international financial intelligence units and anti-money laundering units, such as the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, the Anti-Money Laundering and Suspicious Cases Unit, and the Coalition's Counter-Daesh Finance Group. In mid-2017, the Emirati authorities considered their record in the matter solid enough to be in a position to use this argument as the main one in the narrative around the intra-GCC crisis, by publicly and repeatedly accusing Qatar of financing terrorist organizations, including but not limited to the Muslim Brotherhood.[845]

While all these different aspects are instrumental in unpacking the leadership perceptions of jihadi groups in the UAE, it is paramount to keep in mind the low vulnerability of the country to actual attacks. For instance, the 2017 Global

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[841] Mustafa Al Zarooni, "34 found guilty of setting up Daesh-style group in UAE", *Khaleej Times*, 28 March 2016, https://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/crime/34-found-guilty-of-bid-to-set-up-daesh-style-caliphate (accessed 8 June 2018)

[842] Roth, Greenburg, Wille. "Monograph on Terrorist Financing"

[843] See the "Country Reports on Terrorism" the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2004 – 2016, available at https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm (accessed 14 June 2018)

[844] "US embassy cables: United Arab Emirates and terrorist funding – the Pashtun connection", *The Guardian*, 5 December 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/223330, (accessed 14 June 2018)

[845] William Maclean, Stephen Kalin, "Terrorist financing at heart of Qatar crisis, says UAE minister", *Reuters*, 7 June 2017, http://reut.rs/2s4fQjQ (accessed 14 June 2018)

Terrorism Index has ranked the UAE 112 over 130 countries with regards to its vulnerability to terrorist attacks, and such assessment has been relatively consistent.[846] However, it is equally significant to highlight that the one attack that was perpetrated in 2014, still had an impact on driving the perception of terrorism as an incumbent risk, in particular with a clear-cut societal and economic dimension.[847] To the Emirati leaders portraying the country as safe to investors and expat talents, both vital in the country's economic model, is an absolute priority. [848] This would explain why the 2015 thwarted plot against the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix has received so little media coverage. Given the high societal diversity - especially in Dubai and Abu Dhabi where expats represent a stark majority of the population – the risk to disrupting societal cohesion is also high. However, jihadi groups are confronted with equal proactivity at the regional level, as a threat to the stability of the regional order. In fact, in light of the UAE's political ambitions to play an increased regional role, underlined by its proactive policy in North Africa, Levant as well as the Arabian Peninsula, it is possible to argue that jihadi groups do represent an actual threat to the UAE's external interests. These include political interests in North Africa, military interests in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and economic interests established by increased trade and investment relations through the region. Finally, the UAE's involvement in international initiatives to contrast jihadi groups in Siria, Iraq and Yemen can be viewed through the lenses of strengthening the international political reputation of the country, thus gathering substantial political capital vis-à-vis larger and more powerful actors. Viewed through the lenses of this thesis' theoretical framework, it is possible to argue that jihadi group are perceived as a pressing internal risk, with an economic and social dimension, and as a full-fledged political threat at the external level.

6.5 The UAE's security priorities after 2011.

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[846] The Global Terrorism Index reports, published by the Sydney-based Institute of Economics and Peace, can be viewed at http://economicsandpeace.org/reports/. (accessed 24 May 2018)

[847] This was stressed in three separate interviews of the author with three non-Emirati professors of international relations at UAE-based Universities, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with a European diplomat based in Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, 16 April 2018.

[848] Interview of the author with an Emirati diplomat, London, 3 October 2018.

The three issues identified by the Riyadh Agreements as threats to GCC security have appeared to be perceived, as per this thesis's definitions, mostly exogenous risks or threats although with some pressing internal impacts, especially in the case of non-violent Islamist groups. Through an in-depth analysis as well as through the opinions of sources interviewed, it is possible to advance the argument that at the roots of these perceptions there are two security priorities: preserving the unity of the seven Emirates' Federation and pursuing the stability of the regional order, both political and institutional, in the face of major ideological forces sweeping through the region.

When the United Arab Emirates were formed in 1971, the leaders of the seven Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain had to overcome numerous challenges for the difficult task of unifying the state.[849] The Emirates had, and maintained, distinct ruling families, descending from different tribes, including the al-Nahyan (Abu Dhabi), the al-Maktoum (Dubai), the al-Qasimi (Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah), the al-Nuaimi (Ajman), the al-Mu'alla (Umm Al Quwain) and the al-Sharqi (Fujairah). These families were not ready to surrender power or autonomy, and it took two decades for the military to unify and for Abu Dhabi to become the official capital.[850] For instance, while the armies were unified in 1976, Dubai officially joined only in 1996. While formally the highest constitutional authority in the United Arab Emirates, responsible for ratifying almost every decision or policy is the Federal Supreme Council, where each ruler has one vote, the actual political weight of the seven rulers has been profoundly divergent.[851] The inequality in the distribution of power is mirrored by the vast inequality in the distribution of wealth. In the face of a chronic lack of reliable statistics, which also highlights the sensitivity of the issue, regional affairs expert David Roberts has calculated that in a period from 2004 to 2014, Abu Dhabi, holding the vast majority of the UAE's oil and gas reserves, accounted for an average of 55.9 percent of the state's GDP, Dubai contributed 28.6 percent, Sharjah 4.7 percent, and the Northern Emirates, respectively 1.7 percent Ras al-Khaimah, 1 percent Ajman, 0.6 percent

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[849] Victor Gervais, "Du Pétrole À L'armée: Les Stratégies De Construction De L'état Aux Émirats Arabes Unis" (PhD diss., Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire, Paris, 2011), pp. 221–253.
[850] Davidson, "The United Arab Emirates".
[851] Ibid.

Fujairah, and 0.2 percent Umm al-Quwain.[852] With an economy largely dependent on energy revenues, it is reasonable to assume different disparities also for previous years. Indeed, the Northern Emirates have struggled consistently with issues of unemployment as well as water and power outages unknown in Abu Dhabi which, in turn, has long been subsidizing them.[853] This socio-economic inequality may also be one of the biggest vulnerability of the Federation. As noted in a leaked 2004 cable by the US Embassy in Abu Dhabi, 'poor economic conditions in the Northern Emirates . . . compared to the wealth of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, may be a factor in breeding resentment among some UAE nationals'.[854]

Indeed, in 2011 when, as mentioned, dissent was more widespread in the Northern Emirates, the government issued a USD 1.5 billion investment package specifically dedicated to the area.[855] A senior analyst at the UAE National Defence College interviewed by the author in Abu Dhabi in 2018, highlighted how the package was mainly intended to tackle potential causes for animosity against the capital and therefore, political instability.[856] Following to that, according to another interviewee, Abu Dhabi increased its outreach to the youth of the Northern Emirates to have them employed as staff in the federal institutions, including political entities as well as the army and other security forces, where nationalism is more naturally strengthened.[857] These initiatives were also aimed at the further centralization of loyalties towards Abu Dhabi as the leader of the Federation. A watershed event in this regard has taken place after the 2008 global economic collapse: as the crisis caused a major financial downturn in Dubai, Abu Dhabi bailed out the fellow Emirate by handing out approximately 10 billion USD, a move that gave Abu Dhabi clout over Dubai, effectively weakening Dubai's independence in both economic and political matters.[858] While on one

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[852] Data quoted in Roberts. "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring.", p. 551.

[853] Shaimaa Fayed, "Arab Unrest Puts Focus on UAE's Northern Emirates," *Reuters*, 6 July 2011, https://reut.rs/2fos6Dj (accessed 14 June 2018)

[854] "UAE Minimizing Influence of Islamic Extremists," *Wikileaks*.

[855] Simeon Kerr, "UAE Offers Poorer Emirates $1.5bn," *Financial Times*, 2 March 2011, https:// on.ft.com/2fpe8ky. (accessed 14 June 2018)

[856] Quoted in Martin Dokoupil, "Mideast Money: Northern Emirates Over Cost Haven to Booming UAE," *Reuters*, 20 April 2014, https://reut.rs/2yE5IOK (accessed 14 June 2018)

[857] Interview of the author with one senior researcher at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018

[858] Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai."

hand the strong subsidization of the other Emirates in the form of investments and the provision of services and employment opportunities undoubtedly ties them to Abu Dhabi's authority, on the other hand it cannot obliterate political differences or the existing divergence of interests.

Both have been long-standing. Already in the context of the Iran-Iraq War, while the UAE officially remained neutral, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Fujairah And Abu Dhabi sided with Iraq and Abu Dhabi, alongside Saudi Arabia, even bankrolled Saddam Hussein, whereas Dubai, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain were sympathetic to Iran and Dubai even served as a key transit point for war material destined for Iran.[859] As mentioned, Dubai maintained a pragmatic economic engagement with Iran at least until 2008, when it gradually converged on Abu Dhabi's positions.[860] The Emirate also had somewhat different approaches to political Islam within the state, as emerged in earlier sections.[861] Al-Islah garnered elite patronage since the 1970s in the northern emirates of Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah, and thanks to this backing, it developed a footprint and influence in institutions. As mentioned, Ras al-Khaimah's ruler even shielded the local al-Islah branch from the crackdowns of the 1990s and 2000s and in 1996 he refused to carry on the arrest of a high-profile al-Islah member ordered by Abu Dhabi. While Shaykh Zayed initially announced the intention to give land to the organization in Abu Dhabi, the al-Nahyan ruling family was always wary of allowing another node of power emerging, challenging its rule, and developing a societal following. This became particularly the case from the mid-2000s when Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed consolidated his power and, with it, a long-lasting project to achieve centralization of power. One cannot dismiss upfront the idea, at least as a hypothetical scenario, that the Islah-backing Ras al-Khaimah Emir Saqr bin Muhammad, passed away in 2010, could have drawn on the popular support of the movement in his more conservative Emirate to challenge Abu Dhabi. On the other hand, while diverging on Iran, the leadership in Dubai endorses Abu Dhabi's wariness of al-Islah, considered an obstacle for the *entrepôt*'s socio-economic and socio-cultural global identity.[862] Finally, several interviewees have stated that

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[859] Christopher Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival* (London: Lynne Rienner), 2006, p. 206.
[860] Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai."
[861] Roberts. "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring.", p. 553
[862] Interview of the author with a Dubai-based political advisor, Skype, 3 October 2018

intra-Emirates divergences have emerged, behind closed doors, also in the context of the Qatar crisis: while Ras al-Khaimah refused to consider the Muslim Brotherhood threat grave enough to open a deep intra-GCC crisis, Dubai and Fujairah complained about the economic costs of the crisis, given how vessels to and from Qatar were prevented from docking at their ports, disputing business flows, and how Qatar had consistent investments, subsequently withdrawn, especially in Dubai's real estate sector.[863] Further divergences emerged on the decision to open a military front in Yemen: while the ruler of Dubai disapproved the potential negative impacts on regional stability, the rulers of the Northern Emirates complained of not being consulted by Abu Dhabi before committing troops to the war, notwithstanding the fact that their citizens have filled the front lines and accounted for most of the war deaths.[864] In this context, the defection in 2018 of a son of the ruler of Fujairah to Qatar brought to the surface the suggestion of pushback against Abu Dhabi among the Northern Emirates.[865] These divergences are particularly relevant, in contemporary times, because internal cohesion and unity of intent is nothing but fundamental to implement Abu Dhabi's regional strategy, to place the UAE as a proactive and influential actor in the volatile and conflictual geopolitics of the MENA.

It is this volatile and conflictual regional geopolitics that also occupies the central stage in the Abu Dhabi's security calculus. The emergence of Daesh across the borders of Syria and Iraq in 2014 represented the first, practical attempt to threaten and overcome the centuries-old Westphalian order based on statual entities. The MENA region has long struggled with the validity and legitimacy of such order, ideologically challenged by pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism as a

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[863] This was underlined in several interviews including: Interview of the author with an Emirati think tank director, Dubai, 17 April 2018; Interview of the author with two researchers at the Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) think tank, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2018; Interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat, London, 19 May 2018; Interview of the author with a Qatari scholar of security studies, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019.

[864] Interview of the author with a Dubai-based political advisor, Skype, 3 October 2018; Interview of the author with an American expert on GCC affairs, Skype, 3 May 2019.

[865] David Kirkpatrick, "Emirati Prince Flees to Qatar, Exposing Tensions in U.A.E.", *New York Times*, 14 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/world/middleeast/emirati-prince-qatar-defects.html (accessed 3 October 2018).

legacy imposed by European colonial powers in the region.[866] This is largely applicable, at least in theory, to several GCC states, in particular those established under the aegis of Great Britain and without a tradition of national sovereignty, such as the United Arab Emirates. It is a structural, inescapable socio-political vulnerability, weakening the country's very foundational myth. The question of weak nationalism has, in fact, long featured in the literature on the Arabian Peninsula.[867] In contemporary times several initiatives have been pursued by a number of GCC countries to build or strengthen their population's nationalism, a sign of the increased relevance of the matter. The UAE, in particular has been at the forefront of such efforts through a renewed emphasis on symbolism, for instance through large-scale exhibition of national sentiment during national holidays, the building of new national monuments as well as through more traditional nation-building instruments such as conscription. In 2014 Abu Dhabi has introduced compulsory conscription, requiring men aged 18-30 to serve between 9 months and two years, depending on their education level, and inaugurated women's voluntary enrolment for twelve–month terms in 2016.[868] Perhaps it is against this background that the heightened threat perceptions of the UAE leadership vis-à-vis transnational political ideologies, contesting the state-based model, may be best understood. It is not a case that most of the discourse around the Muslim Brotherhood focuses on their goal to further the pan-Islamist cause through the establishment of a single Islamic state, or Caliphate. In the words of the UAE Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, 'the Muslim Brotherhood does not believe in the nation state. It does not believe in the sovereignty of the state.'[869]

Interestingly, in the UAE a parallel is often drawn between the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran's Khomeinism, calling the Brotherhood a Sunni

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[866] Roger Owen. *State, power and politics in the making of the modern Middle East*. (London: Routledge), 2013.

[867] Neil Partrick, "Nationalism in the Gulf States". Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, 20109.

[868] Eleonora Ardemagni, Building New Gulf States Through Conscription, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 April 2018, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76178 (accessed 14 June 2018)

[869] "Gulf states must tackle Muslim Brotherhood threat: UAE". *Reuters*, 8 October 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-brotherhood/gulf-states-must-tackle-muslim-brotherhood-threat-uae-idUSBRE8970SD20121008 (accessed 12 June 2018.)

version of Khomeini's theory of an Islamic State.[870] Highlighted similarities include particular conservativism in their interpretation of Islamic law, hostility towards economic modernization and secularization in particular, anti-Americanism and anti-Israel positions.[871] Moreover, both the traditional theologies and political theories of the Brotherhood and that of Khomeinism are described by their efforts to transform religious beliefs into modern political ideologies against more secular regimes.[872] In particular an Emirati scholar, Director of a Dubai-based think tank, highlighted during interviews with the author this state versus non-state paradigm. He first made references to both the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi organizations, that are often put into correlation in the country. However he particularly focused on this ideological conflict when speaking about UAE-Iran relations, by arguing: 'Iran is Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: it has a state, a sub-state and a supra-state. The Supreme Leader, Khamenei, presents himself not only as a political leader, but also as a representative of God, someone above the human law. How do you deal with someone like this? Take, for instance, the 2016 attack on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran: while Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, and Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani apologised, Khamenei argued that this was the manifestation of God's wrath against the al-Saud, making it impossible to deal with the events politically. Even Iran's intervention in the Syrian civil war has been justified through religious arguments, such as the necessity and the legitimacy to intervene in another country to defend the Shi'a shrine of Zeynab bint Ali located in Damascus. In short, Iran is still driven according to theocratic considerations, hostile to the concepts of states and borders.'[873] A prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, interviewed by the author via Skype in 2019 agreed that: 'Iran is more than a state, it is an ideology which has to expand to survive. The UAE is facing an hegemonic power.'[874]

In light of the analysis provided in this chapter, it is possible to corroborate the hypothesis that the Arab Spring impacted strongly the security perceptions of leaders and policy-makers in the UAE. Coinciding with power shifts within the

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[870] Samuel Helfont, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Emerging 'Shia Crescent,'" *Orbis* 53, No 2 (2009): pp. 284-299.
[871] Ibid.
[872] Ibid.
[873] Interview of the author with an Emirati think tank director, Dubai, 17 April 2018.
[874] Interview of the author with a prominent Emirati commentator on current affairs, Skype, 7 February 2019.

state itself, the Arab Spring ushered in a time of heightened threat perceptions and more assertive policies to counter those. At the root of the leadership's insecurity, however, there appears to be issues that go beyond its current narratives and discourses and have their roots in the country's socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities, such as institutionalised intra-Emirates inequality or the insufficient coherence and strength of the ideational foundations underpinning the nation-state.

7.0 CHAPTER SEVEN: QATAR.

When looking at contemporary threat perceptions in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, Qatar stands out evidently as a unique case. This exceptionalism arguably is the reason why Qatar was the one target of both intra-GCC crises, in 2014 and 2017. In fact, a detailed review of Qatar's perceptions of the main issues around which the crises were triggered, carried on in this chapter, will highlight how Doha's perspectives have consistently been divergent from that of the other GCC countries. These divergences, it is hypothesized in this thesis, are also rooted in the different experiences lived by the GCC monarchies during the 2011 Arab Spring.

The first paragraph will analyse Qatar's experience with the Arab Spring and the impacts – or lack thereof - on security perceptions.The Qatari leadership, not experiencing any sustained opposition, did not embace the process of hyper-securitisation that characterised post-2011 policy-making in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf.[875] Indeed, with one of the smallest and wealthiest population in *per capita* terms in the region, issues such as lack of socio-political cohesion and socio-economic imbalances have limited space to escalate.[876] Qatar's stability during those turbulent times, will be argued here, highlighted the absence of strong socio-economic and socio-political vulnerabilities and fault lines within the country.[877] That affected the leadership's perceptions vis-à-vis the actors that came out empowered after the Arab Spring and due to the geopolitical reshuffles that followed - including the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran and aligned Shi'a groups, jihadi organizations - as non full-fledged threats.[878] These perceptions will be analysed in the three following sections.

However, if Qatar was shielded from perceiving internal and intermestic threats arising after 2011, the intra-GCC crises, and especially that of 2017, rang alarm

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[875] Almezaini and Rickli, (eds.) *The Small Gulf States*.

[876] David Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State*. (London: Hurst), 2017.

[877] This point was also raised by a Doha-based senior professor of international relations and Gulf studies interveiwed by the author in Doha on 14 April 2019 who argued that: 'Qatar has a small, homogeneous and wealthy population hence domestic fault lines are naturally kept under check.'

[878] Ibid.

bells for Qatar's leadership, perceiving that the country remains vulnerable to external threats. Similarly to other small GCC monarchies, the proximity to two large neighbours, Saudi Arabia and Iran, has traditionally induced the Qatari leadership to perceive what have been defined in this thesis as risks. The 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises saw the risks posed by Saudi Arabia – and its revamped alliance with the UAE – becoming acute external threats with multiple dimensions. This will be analysed in the final section of this chapter, contextualising the leadership's related perceptions in the country's history and structural features.

7.1 Qatar and the Arab Spring.

Qatar did not witness meaningful public protests in 2011 nor faced any sustained opposition. Subsequently, the regime never perceived an actual challenge to its identity, sovereignty or stability in those circumstances. In the words of a Doha-based professor of international relations interviewed by the author in 2018: 'Qatar did not consider the Arab Spring a threat for one moment'.[879]

In a population of 2.6 million, only some 250,000 - 300,000 possess Qatari citizenship and those enjoy the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) *per capita* worldwide, estimated at approximately USD 440,000 by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2008.[880] A Qatari academic interviewed in Doha put it bluntly: 'In Qatar the demographics doesn't allow for dissent: there are only 300,000 Qataris, 10 percent of whom is made by the royal family and related clans and 30 percent of whom is constituted by supporting tribes'.[881] Citizens are also entitled to a cradle-to-grave generous welfare system including free healthcare and education, the assurance of getting a well-paid job in the public sector and several subsidies and grants.[882] Furthermore the resources at disposal of the state for these provisions are so significant that all Qatari citizens, irrespective of their ethnic origin or sectarian belonging, have been recipients to some of this

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[879] Interview of the author with a Doha-based professor of international relations, Doha, 30 April 2018.
[880] Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*.
[881] Interview of the author with a Qatari academic at Qatar University, Doha, 26 April 2018.
[882] Jocelyn Sage Mitchell. "Beyond allocation: The politics of legitimacy in Qatar." PhD Thesis, Georgetown University, 2013.

largesse.[883] No significant economic inequality or active economic marginalization – or, as defined in this thesis, socio-economic vulnerabilities – appear evident in relation to wealth distribution among Qatari nationals. In fact, there is a consensus in the area studies literature that such a favourable resources-to-citizens ratio prevents the emergence of meaningful displays of political or economic grievances by the majority of citizens.[884] Qataris simply have too much at stake with their system and, as evidenced by a quick comparison with the status of the large community of migrant labourers, too much to loose by challenging it. Such wealth is also considered at the root of a significant degree of political apathy and lack of democratic aspiration. This was validated, for instance, from the results of two separate public opinion polls conducted by Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute revealing that, between December 2010 and June 2011, the proportion of Qataris who rated living in a democratic country as 'very important' dropped from 74 percent to 65 percent, with a relative decrease of 12 percent.[885]

At the same time, the country was not completely insulated from or oblivious to the Arab Spring. Encouraged by events in Egypt and Tunisia, a small political group named Qataris for Reform emerged in March 2011.[886] Around sixty Qataris, led by Qatari academic 'Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, started meeting once a month during 'Monday Meetings' to discuss economic and political reform. Out of these meetings came a book edited by al-Kuwari and published in 2012 with the title *Al Sha'hab Yurid Islah fi Qatar…Aidan* (The People Want Reform In Qatar…Too).[887] The book, banned in Qatar, addressed several of the most critical issues characterising the authoritarian rule in Qatar, albeit without calling

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[883] Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1990, pp. 156–7.
[884] See for instance: Ulrichsen. *Qatar and the Arab Spring*; Yom and Gause. "Resilient royals"; Guido Steinberg. "Qatar and the Arab Spring." *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, SWP Comments 2012/C 7.1 (2012).
[885] Justin Gengler, "Qatar's Ambivalent Democratization," *Foreign Policy*, 1 November 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/01/qatars-ambivalent-democratization/ , (accessed 25 July 2018)
[886] "Interview with Dr. Ali Khalifa Al Kuwari, author of "The People Want Reform… In Qatar, Too" - Statehood & Participation", *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 3 March 2014, https://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/interview-dr-ali-khalifa-al-kuwari-author-people-want-reform-qatar-too-statehood (accessed 14 July 2018)
[887] 'Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, *Al Sha'hab Yurid Islah fi Qatar…Aidan,* (Beirut: Al Maaref Forum), 2012.

for the overthrow of the regime or the ruling family.[888] One of the initial points covered in the book was a complain of the lack of freedom of expression and press in the country, curtailed by a Press Law with excessively severe penalties for journalists, and the regime's micro-managing of media institutions.[889] Another major point raised deals with the lack of transparency in the management of the public finances and resources, including the fact that final budget accounts, state reserves, details of state investments, the size of national debt, are not of public domain.[890] In relation to that, the author questions, more broadly, the lack of popular participation in the decision-making process and public policy choices. He also laments a lack of interlocutors, given how Qatari laws do not permit the establishment of political bodies, forums for debate, professional syndicates or trade unions, or civil society associations with a focus on public affairs.[891] Al-Kuwari finally addressed the demographic and economic imbalances in Qatar. While the percentage of citizens in the population fell from 40 percent in 1970 to just 12 percent by 2010, their participation in a burgeoning workforce also dropped from 14 percent to 6 percent over the same period.[892] According to al-Kuwari this puts Qatar's national identity in danger in the long term. The complete dependence of the country's economy on the energy revenues is presented as similarly destabilising. Finally, the GCC countries' dependence on foreign powers for their security is also singled out as a major concern. This comprehensive criticism of the state and the related calls for comprehensive reform, however, weren't seemingly embraced by the wider public in Qatar. This might be largely attributed to the apathy generated by wealth, as aforementioned, but also by the willingness of the government to at least acknowledge the validity of these points. Finally, repression was employed in a handful of cases including that of Muhammad al-Ajami, a poet sentenced in 2011 to life imprisonment - pardoned in 2016 - for posting a poem allegedly 'inciting the overthrow of the regime and

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[888] "Democracy? That's for other Arabs". *The Economist*, 8 June 2013, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/06/08/democracy-thats-for-other-arabs, (accessed 14 July 2018)
[889] 'Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, "Qataris for Reform", dr-alkuwari.net, 2011, http://dr-alkuwari.net/sites/akak/files/qatarisforreform-translation.pdf , p. 5
[890] Ibid, p. 3
[891] Ibid., p. 2
[892] Ibid., p. 9

insulting Emir Hamad' and of the blogger Sultan al-Khulaifi, detained for one month in 2011 for its writings on censorship in Qatar.[893]

Overall, Qatar's government in 2011 had confidence that the country was not going to be affected by the wave of popular mobilisation that spread in the region.[894] In fact, where the other GCC states saw a threat to their regimes' stability, fuelled by the success of upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, Doha's leaders saw an opportunity. Qatari officials reacted to popular protests with enthusiasm, and vivid declarations of support for the opposition movements and for 'democracy, dignity and freedom in the Arab world'.[895] Al Jazeera, particularly in its Arabic version, rode the wave of popular mobilisation, providing a region-wide platform to anti-regime activists' testimonies and ideas. Its coverage of events in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and, after some initial hesitations, Syria, was extensive and openly supportive of the protest movements.[896] By contrast, the coverage of protests in Bahrain was markedly milder, prompting accusations of inconsistencies and hypocrisy.[897] However, while Al Jazeera Arabic remained hesitant to cover Bahrain, Al Jazeera English produced and broadcasted in August 2011 a controversial documentary about the crackdown of protests in the island kingdom, titled "Shouting in the Dark", that was allegedly withdrawn after protests by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.[898] The intervention of the GCC's Peninsula Shield against opposition groups in Bahrain, to which Qatar participated with two advisors, also opened the government to criticism of double-standards.[899] However it is worth noting that the Qatari government had attempted a different route, participating to the negotiations between the Manama government and the main Shi'a opposition bloc, al-Wefaq, an initiative that would later be denounced

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[893] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*, p.119.

[894] Interview of the author with a Doha-based professor of Gulf studies, Doha, 15 December 2018.

[895] Several statements are quoted in Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*.

[896] Aref Hijjawi. "The role of Al-Jazeera (Arabic) in the Arab revolts of 2011." Political Analysis and Commentary from the Middle East 2, *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2011.

[897] See for instance Colombo. "The GCC and the Arab Spring".

[898] Brian Stelter, "Al Jazeera Changes Plan to Rerun Documentary", *The New York Times*, 9 August 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/10/world/middleeast/10jazeera.html (accessed 21 July 2017)

[899] Colombo, "The GCC and the Arab Spring".

by the quartet's media as an attempt to interfere in Bahraini affairs and destabilise the monarchy.[900]

In order to shield the government from accusations of hypocrisy and double-standards, that could weaken international support vital for Doha as well as the relations between the rulers and the ruled domestically, the young Emir Tamim opened a new season of reforms as a consequence of the 2017 intra-GCC crisis.[901] Pushing further limited liberalization was deemed valuable to attract international support as well as to reinforce the Emir's domestic legitimacy, challenged by the quartet's initiative against Doha.[902] In November 2017, Emir Tamim announced that in 2019 Qatar would hold long-promised elections for two-thirds of the Majilis as-Shura (Consultative Assembly) for the first time in the country's history. Commenting the decision on Qatar's main outlet *The Peninsula*, Dr. Khalid Al Jaber, Director of the Doha-based think tank Gulf International Forum wrote: 'As Doha has backed causes linked with social justice, democracy, equality, and human rights across the Arab world - especially since the 2011 uprisings - Qataris are now viewing the GCC crisis as an opportunity to make internal reforms consistent with its regional and international positions.'[903] Between 2017 and 2018 Qatar also issued new legislations to improve human rights standards for its nearly 2 million migrant labour workers, for decades lacking many of the most basic rights.[904] These legislations include new provisions attempting to tackle issues of exploitation, as well as reforms of the abusive *kafala* (sponsorship) system, whereby the government rather than the employer would sponsor workers, and raising health and safety standards.[905] The fact that these reforms were not introduced during 2011 or shortly after, clarifies

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[900] "Bahrain TV plays tapes showing Qatar's role in 2011 crisis", *Gulf News*, 17 June 2017, https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-tv-plays-tapes-showing-qatar-s-role-in-2011-crisis-1.2045153 (accessed 14 July 2018)

[901] Interview of the author with a Doha-based professor of Gulf studies, Doha, 15 December 2018.

[902] Kristin Smith Diwan, "Qatar's Domestic Agenda and the Gulf Crisis, *Lawfare Blog*, 25 February 2018, https://www.lawfareblog.com/qatars-domestic-agenda-and-gulf-crisis. (accessed 19 July 2018)

[903] Khalid Al Jaber, "Qatar: Internal reforms consistent with its regional & international positions", *The Peninsula*, 10 December 2017, https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/opinion/10/12/2017/Qatar-Internal-reforms-consistent-with-its-regional-international-positions (accessed 19 July 2018)

[904] "Qatar: Year of Crisis Spurred Rights Reforms", *Human Rights Watch*, 18 January 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/qatar-year-crisis-spurred-rights-reforms, (accessed 19 July 2018).

[905] Ibid.

how they are disconnected from any concerns on behalf of the regime about domestic protests in favour of liberalization, on the wave of the Arab Spring. They are, instead, closely related to the GCC crisis that, as will be later on explored, was first and foremost perceived as challenging the legitimacy of the ruling regime and, hence, its stability. In this sense, viewed from Doha, in 2017 Saudi Arabia was a more hostile player than Iran.

7.2 Qatar and the 'Shi'a threat'.

The post-2011 perceptions of the Qatari leadership vis-à-vis Iran - and the threat the Iranian regime may pose via transnational Shi'a groups - are characterised by a complex interrelation of different factors, and largely centered around the danger Iran poses to Qatar's regional interests, rather than to the stability, identity and sovereignty of the Qatari regime. Viewed through this thesis' framework, it can thus be argued that Iran is mostly perceived in Doha as posing an acute external risk, not an existential, political, threat.

International relations scholar Mehran Kamrava, long based in Doha, in 2018 defined Iran-Qatar relations as 'broadly friendly', and characterised by a 'no dispute approach' as the two countries have been 'drawn together by forces of circumstance rather than policy preferences'.[906] For both of them, he continues, the benefits of mutual accommodation have outweighed the costs of confrontation. Qatar is one of the few Arab neighbours which Iran sees as a potential partner, especially in trade and energy policies. To Qatar, Iran has been a key actor in its foreign policy strategy of hedging: employing relations with Tehran as a counterweight to Riyadh, while attempting not to antagonizing either neighbour.[907] The two countries share sovereignty of the largest gas field in the world, South Pars/North Dome, the source of most of Qatar's wealth, which has also given Doha the resources to punch above its weight in international politics.[908] Following to the first deal related to the gas field in 1990, Doha and Tehran managed to keep some level of cooperation and in 2008 they even co-

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[906] Mehran Kamrava "Iran-Qatar relations" in Bahgat, Ehteshami, Quilliam (eds.), *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 167.
[907] Ibid.
[908] Ibid.

founded, with Russia, the Gas Exporting Countries Forum.[909] Maintaining working relations with Iran has thus had a strategic value for Qatar, wanting to preserve its energy agreement with the Islamic Republic from political disagreements. This element also emerges in Qatar's relations with Iran throughout history.

Prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, relations between the Qatari and Iranian monarchies were based on cooperation and the recognition of the Shah regime as a factor of stability in the Gulf. The 1970s' Doha ruler Sheikh Khalifa, closely aligned with Riyadh's positions, remained broadly supportive of the Shah until his last days.[910] However, aside from the fact that about 70 Qatari Shi'a travelled to Qom to express support to Khomeini in March 1979, the revolution did not have a destabilising echo in Qatar.[911] Still, Qatar remained suspicious of the new regime in Tehran and, for instance, sided unequivocally with the UAE on the issue of the islands occupied by Tehran, perhaps fearing that Iran might be harbouring territorial ambitions against Doha too.[912] When, following to the death of Khomeini in 1989, Iran's President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani launched an initiative to repair relations with Iran's Arab neighbours, he was well received in Doha, particularly after the ascension to the throne in 1995 of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who, seeking to disenfranchise Qatar from the Saudi shadow, accelerated on the hedging strategy towards Iran.[913] Subsequently, several high-level visits were exchanged and Qatar discouraged the US on carrying on a military attack against Iran as the nuclear dossier heated up.[914] The Emir even invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to attend a GCC meeting in Doha in December 2007, annoying other GCC leaders.[915] In 2009 Iran's Defence Minister met with the chief of staff in the Qatari Defence Ministry to discuss defence and security cooperation, including on combating smuggling and drugs

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[909] Justin Dargin. "Qatar's natural gas: the foreign-policy driver." *Middle East Policy* 14.3 (2007): p. 136.
[910] Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar relations", p. 171.
[911] Rouhullah K. Ramazani "Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Persian Gulf." *Current History*, 5 (1986), p. 7.
[912] "Qatar supports UAE on return of occupied islands", *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 21 January 1981.
[913] Mehran Kamrava. "Mediation and Qatari foreign policy." *The Middle East Journal* 65.4 (2011): pp. 539-556.
[914] Emile Hokayem and Matteo Legrenzi. "The Arab Gulf States in the Shadow of the Iranian Nuclear Challenge." *The Stimson Center*, 2006.
[915] "When Global Leaders Graced GCC Summits", *Arab News*, 23 April 2016, available at http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/913981, (accessed 12 July 2018)

trade, potential joint military exercises and expanding coordination of coast guards.[916] Although practical initiatives lagged behind, the dialogue always remained open. Emir Hamad's strategy, to turn Qatar into a small power with far-reaching capabilities in regional diplomacy, while shielding it from its bigger neighbours, encouraged the Qatari leadership to preserve dialogue with Tehran and even open channels of communication with non-state actors involved in regional conflicts, including Sunni factions and, more controversially, Shi'a groups with ties to Iran.

Since 2003, the Shi'a-aligned Zaydi rebel group known as Houthis had launched an insurgency against the Yemeni government, and several policy-makers in the Arabian Peninsula alleged that they were encouraged and aided by Iran with arms and military instructors in their struggle.[917] The following year, in 2008, Qatar negotiated a peace agreement between the two parties whereby Doha pledged over USD 300 million in reconstruction assistance for the Northern Yemeni province of Saada, where the Houthis reside.[918] Shortly after the accords were signed, fighting resumed. Subsequent Qatari mediation efforts, dated 2010, were again fruitless and a Houthi insurgency revamped after street protests toppled the Yemeni regime in 2011. The group conquered large sways of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa, in 2014. To counter this Houthi advance, amid mounting allegations of Iranian support, Saudi Arabia launched a military offensive, with UAE backing, in 2015.[919] Qatar initially eschewed involvement in the operations, only to nominally join the Saudi-led coalition, after Saudi pressures, in the aftermath of the 2014 intra-GCC crises, to debunk accusations of collusion with the Houthis and Iran.[920] Yet in December 2017, the UAE Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs argued that 'Qatari mediation to save the Houthi sectarian militia is well documented' and between December 2017 and May 2018 two Qatari intelligence officers - Mohammad al-Otaibi and Mohsen al-Karbi - were

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[916] "Iran, Qatar vow cooperation for greater regional security," *AFP via Jordan Times*, 21 December 2010, http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=32797 (accessed 12 July 2018)

[917] "Yemenis intercept 'Iranian ship'", *BBC*, 27 October 2009.

[918] "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb." Middle East Report No. 86, *International Crisis Group*, 27 May 2009.

[919] Juneau. "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen".

[920] Manuel Almeida, "What Qatar's role in Yemen tells about the Gulf crisis", *Arab News*, 16 June 2017, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1116206 (accessed 13 July 2018)

arrested while crossing into Yemen with the accusation of wanting to mediate on behalf of the Houthis.[921] While these accusations and arrests may no doubt have been influenced by the context of high political hostility, and have been rebuked by Qatar, a number of interviewees in Doha spoke about the Houthis as impactful players, grounded in the reality of the Yemeni national fabric, and thus inescapable interlocutors: part and parcel of the domestic political life rather than a threat to stability in the Gulf.[922] Another controversial case was related to Qatar's engagement with Lebanese militia, and Iranian client, Hezbollah. In 2008, clashes broke out between Hezbollah fighters and soldiers of the Lebanese National Army, and Lebanon became close to precipitate in a new civil war.[923] The Qatari Emir received the conflicting parties in Doha, managing to convince them to sign the Doha Agreement, which called for a national-unity government and granted the Hezbollah-led opposition voting power in the Lebanese government.[924] Both the political empowerment acknowledged by the agreement to Hezbollah and the large investment and aid funds - totalling around USD 300 million - pledged by Doha as a diplomatic leverage, sparked outrage in Riyadh, whose leadership again accused Qatar of supporting Iran's regional strategy.[925] Fast forward to 2011, Qatar and Hezbollah found themselves on opposite trenches in the context of the Syrian civil war during which Qatar unequivocally and profusely supported a myriad of groups in the, mostly Sunni, Syrian opposition, fighting intensely the forces of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, backed by Hezbollah fighters and other Iranian-sent Shi'a militias and under the

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[921] "Qatar intelligence officer arrested over Al Houthi links", *Gulf News*, 3 May 2018, https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-intelligence-officer-arrested-over-al-houthi-links-1.2215773, (accessed 12 July 2018) "UAE: Qatar tried to mediate in Yemen to save Houthis", *Al Arabiya*, 20 December 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/12/02/UAE-Qatar-tried-to-mediate-in-Yemen-to-save-Houthis.html (accessed 12 July 2018)

[922] Interview of the author with a consultant at Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with a Doha-based think tank Director, Skype, 17 May 2018; Interview of the author with a Dubai-based political advisor, Skype, 3 October 2018

[923] See: George Hajjar, "The Convoluted and Diminished Lebanese Democracy." *Democracy and Security*, 5 (3), 2009, pp. 261–76.

[924] Simon Haddad, "Lebanon: From Consociationalism to Conciliation". *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 15: (3), 2009, pp. 398–416.

[925] Mohammed Alyahya provides a helpful insight on Saudi Arabia's narrative in "The Rift with Qatar as Seen in Riyadh", a commentary published by *The Atlantic* on 13 June 2017, on http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-rift-with-qatar-as-seen-in-riyadh (accessed 12 July 2018)

protection of Russian air force.[926] Qatar was back into a – forced – dialogue with Hezbollah as a consequence of the 2015 kidnapping of a group of Qatari royals in the Iraqi desert by Kata'eb Hezbollah, an Iraqi Shi'a faction, funded and supervised by Iran's Quds Force.[927] The hostages became a valuable asset for Iran's Quds Forces leader Qassem Suleimani who sent a Hezbollah intermediary to Doha offering their release in exchange for Qatar pressuring some rebel groups it sponsored in Syria into a local compromise with Hezbollah.[928] In addition to accepting to facilitate such deal, Qatar also had to pay around USD 700m to secure the release of hostages in April 2017: these sums of money ending up in the coffers of Shi'a militias were used by Qatar's GCC neighbours as evidence of Doha's complicity in dealing with groups accused of destabilising the region.[929]

Qatar downsized its level of engagements with regional actors considered controversial by other GCC states after the 2014 diplomatic crisis and the ascension of the young Emir Tamim bin Hamad, who was already less prone than his father to adventurism in the region.[930] Emir Tamim rejected the invitation by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to a 2015 summit in Tehran and downgraded its diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic when the Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked in January 2016.[931] However, Doha did not sever its relations with Iran. For instance in the context of the JCPOA, both in the 2013 *ad interim* version and the 2015 definitive version, the posture adopted by Qatar was conciliatory: Khalid al-Attiyah, the former Qatari Foreign Minister, was one of the first officials in the region to welcome the nuclear agreement, stating that the deal would make the region safer.[932] A few weeks after the agreement Qatar even spoke in favour of launching a dialogue between Tehran and its Arab neighbours.[933] Qatar also stepped forward in speeding up economic engagement

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[926] Phillips. "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs".

[927] Robert Worth, "Kidnapped Royalty Become Pawns in Iran's Deadly Plot" *The New York Times*, 14 March 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/magazine/how-a-ransom-for-royal-falconers-reshaped-the-middle-east.html (accessed 12 July 2018)

[928] Ibid.

[929] Alyahya, "The Rift with Qatar as Seen in Riyadh".

[930] This point was also raised by a Doha-based senior professor of international relations and Gulf studies interveiwed by the author in Doha on 14 April 2019

[931] Kamrava, "Iran - Qatar relations", p. 178

[932] Quoted in: Ali Mamouri, Is Qatar Iran's door to the Gulf?, *Al-Monitor*, 4 November 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-qatar-rapprochement-middle-east.html, (accessed 21 July 2017)

[933] Ibid.

with Iran: in 2014 the establishment of three joint free trade zones, in Bushehr, Doha and Al-Ruwais was announced.[934]

In 2017, such pragmatic attitude paid off in the context of the GCC crisis, when Qatar was allowed to transit through Iran's territorial waters for maintaining its energy export lines open.[935] By attempting to block Qatar's exports and imports, the quartet countries intended to create an economic costs for Qatar's politics, thus potentially tarnishing the leadership's legitimacy. Iran's cooperation thus was a factor of stability for the regime, its identity and the state's functional integrity: as a result there was no ground to perceive it as a threat, as per this thesis' definitions, in arguably the most vulnerable moment for the Qatari regime since 2011. Still Doha's policy of dialogue with Saudi Arabia's competitor appeared entirely pragmatic: Tehran's support was vital in order to remain solvent to energy partners and continue to receive essential energy revenues, but hasn't led to deeper political engagement. As one interviewee working as an advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence argued: 'Before the crisis Qatar-Iran relations were at a barely functional level, after the crisis Iran became vital. However, it is out of mutual interest not political convergence.'[936] On the other hand, maintaining a line of dialogue with Iran - that historically never actively threatened the Qatari regime's stability - potentially provides Qatar with a hedging opportunity, in a way that may increase its chances to pursue political interests independently from Saudi Arabia.[937] This is especially true considering that, in Doha, Iran is not perceived as having the intent and capabilities to pose the threat perceived by other GCC countries: using the local Shi'a population as a leverage against the regime.

Over the decades, Qatar's leadership never perceived security concerns with the political allegiance of the country's small Shi'a community, or viewed the community as an instrument of a potential intermestic threat orchestrated by Iran: 'Iran has supported Shi'a opposition in several GCC countries, but never in Qatar' argued a Doha-based advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence in an April 2018

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[934] "Tehran, Doha will establish free trade zones" *Iran Daily*, 6 July 2014.
[935] Cinzia Bianco, "The Gulf Crisis: A Year Later" *Fondazione Oasis*, 7 June 2018, https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/the-gulf-crisis-a-year-later (accessed 12 July 2018)
[936] Interview of the author with a Doha-based senior advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence, Doha, 29 April 2018.
[937] Hussein Kalout, The Geopolitics of the Arab World and the Comprehensive Nuclear Agreement, in Payam Mohseni (ed.), *Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era*, The Iran Project, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 3 August 2015.

interview with the author, echoing other interviewees.[938] First off, Qatari Shi'a are estimated to constitute only between 5 and 10 percent of its citizenry.[939] Shi'a citizens enjoy the same state largesse as other citizens, including a generous and comprehensive welfare system, and are guaranteed equal rights by the Constitution.[940] Generally speaking, it is often noted by local interlocutors that, unlike other GCC countries, Shi'a in Qatar are virtually indistinguishable from their Sunni co-citizens in appearance and behaviour.[941] Like the rest of Qatari society, Shi'a are not particularly active politically as generally their political and economic situation does not elicit specific demands or grievance: in fact no meaningful display of opposition by Shi'a has ever taken place in Qatar.[942] Many Qatari Shi'a belong to merchant families and they are present in most government departments, including in the country's Consultative Assembly, Ministries, the army and educational institutions. However, few of them reach highly senior positions.[943] Religious discrimination seems to be uncommon: while the majority of Qataris, including the royal family, belong to the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, and the public education curriculum is based exclusively on Sunni Islam, Qatari Shi'a practice religious rituals freely, and the official religious curriculum is devoid of anti-Shi'a propaganda.[944]

Sectarian relations have been, at times, under stress, yet mostly in the context of intense sectarian-motivated violence in the region. Qatar's ruling family maintains

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[938] Interview of the author with a Doha-based senior advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence, 29 April 2018, Doha. The point was also raised by a Gulf studies professor interviewed by the author in Doha on 15 December 2018, and by a Qatari scholar of security studies interviewed in Doha on 28 April 2018.

[939] This is excluding tens of thousands of foreign workers identifying as Shi'a, including: Iranian nationals – who make up about 10 percent of Qatar's foreign workers, many of whom small entrepreneurs – and other from Pakistan, India, and regional Arab countries. "Shia in Qatar quiet on political issues, bothered by Qaradawi", *Wikileaks*, 7 February 2007, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07DOHA137_a.html (accessed 12 July 2018)

[940] "Shia in Qatar quiet on political issues, bothered by Qaradawi", *Wikileaks*.

[941] Interview of the author with a Qatari academic at Qatar University, Doha, 26 April 2018; Interview of the author with a Qatari scholar of security studies, Doha, 28 April 2018.

[942] Interview with a consultant at Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; "The Shi'a population was never a threat in Qatar" argued a Doha-based Director of a think tank close to the leadership in an interview with author on Skype, 17 May 2018.

[943] Interview of the author with a senior researcher at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, 26 April 2018.

[944] "Qatar: International Religious Freedom Report", US Department of State, 2016, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269154.pdf (accessed 12 july 2018)

a good relationship with foreign Shi'a leaders, including Iran's Supreme Leader.[945] While most Qatari Shi'a emulate Iraq's Ayatollah Sistani rather than the Iranian Khamenei as *marja'iyya*, this relaxed attitude on behalf of the leadership is *per se* significant.[946] Indeed, when asked about security concerns and Iran, Qatari thinkers close to the government all made reference exclusively to Tehran's regional politics and to Syria, where Qatar has been at the forefront of the conflict.[947] Failure to achieve the desired outcome in Syria, however, would hardly lead to political instability for the Qatari regime. One Qatari academic close to the government said: 'Qatar always had stable relations with Iran, treating Iran with respect and remaining open to dialogue. Our problem is with Iran's role in the region. Specifically, we have one main dispute: Syria.'[948] Another interviewee, a professor of international relations based in Doha added: 'Qatar looks at Iran as a challenge, not a threat. There are political differences not an identitarian fight.'[949] Viewed through this thesis' framework, it can be argued that, especially in the period under consideration here, 2011-2017, Iran has been perceived as posing is an acute external risk, putting in danger the political interests of Qatar in the region, rather than a threat to the identity, stability and sovereignty of the regime.

7. 3 Qatar and the 'Islamist threat'.

As Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani often declared, there would be no compelling reason to undertake any drastic, harsh measure against the Brotherhood, as the organization represents no threat to Qatar's security.[950] To better situate this idea in the wider context, it would be

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[945] "Leader Meets with Emir of Qatar", official website of Ayatollah Khamenei, 20 December 2010, http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1396/Leader-Meets-with-Emir-of-Qatar (accessed 12 July 2018)

[946] Ibid.

[947] Interview of the author with a Doha-based senior advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence, Doha, 29 April 2018; Interview of the author with a Qatari scholar of security studies, Doha, 28 April 2018.

[948] Interview of the author with a Qatari advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018.

[949] Interview of the author with a Doha-based professor of international relations, 30 April 2018, Doha.

[950] Al-Sulaimi, ""We don't, won't and didn't support the Muslim Brotherhood".

useful to undertake an overview of the organization's presence and role in the Emirate.

Until the 1950s, Qatar was a scarcely populated country, with no schools and no state institutions or administrative and bureaucratic offices.[951] Starting from the 1960s, the leadership stipulated to import human resources to build the country and, subsequently, the first Egyptian Brotherhood members were appointed to key positions in the Qatari education sector. Izz al-Din Ibrahim was tasked with creating a school syllabus while Abd al-Mu az al-Sattar, close to Hassan al-Banna himself, co-authored 'numerous textbooks for the nascent Qatari school system' and was appointed school inspector and director of Islamic sciences in the Ministry of Education.[952] In 1961, the Brotherhood ideologue Yusuf al-Qaradawi took up a teaching position at the Qatari branch of the al-Azhar University.[953] Galvanised by the retreat of pan-Arab nationalism across the region in the early 1970s, Brotherhood intellectuals and their followers saw their influence increase, and finally decided to establish an official organization to oversee the group's activities in Doha in 1975.[954] The Qatari Brotherhood was, in the words of scholar of political Islam Courtney Freer, 'an informal organization focused primarily on *daʿwa* (proselytization), intense study of *shari'a*, organization of sporting activities, and integration into the community, attracting young people in particular to Brotherhood-sponsored trips, sports, charity, and public lectures.'[955] Still this body of coordination facilitated to an even greater extent the prevalence of Brotherhood members or sympathisers in Qatar's bureaucracies for decades. However, the organization was quite short-lived, as it was officially disbanded in 1999 after a vote among its members.[956] The process of its dissolution, characterised by speculations and lack of transparency, culminated into what can been defined a full co-optation of the organization by the Qatari state, as Brotherhood members continued to be allowed and, at times, encouraged, to operate freely.

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[951] See Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar* (London: Croom Helm) 1979, p. 96.
[952] Ibid., 86–87.
[953] Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 86.
[954] Abd Allah al-Nafisi, "al-Hala al-Islamiyya fi Qatar," *IslamToday*, 12 March 2007, http://www.islamtoday.net/bohooth/artshow-19-8828.htm, (accessed 14 July 2018)
[955] Freer. "Rentier Islamism in the absence of elections", p. 486
[956] Ibid., p. 488

Yet, as David Roberts convincingly argued, it would be far-fetched to state that the organization has ideologically influenced contemporary Qatari politics.[957] Indeed, the group's most meaningful impact on contemporary domestic politics, for instance, seemed to be pushing conservative social provisions such as limitations to alcohol sales.[958] Scholars have argued that the Brotherhood's limited influence on domestic policy-making in Doha is, first and foremost, related to its limited traction at the level of the Qatari citizenry, in spite of their outsized presence in the education sector. Courtney Freer in her research has confirmed that Brotherhood sympathizers, especially publicly identifying as members, constitute a small proportion of Qatari society.[959] This lack of Brotherhood's penetration in Qatar has been explained by several scholars with the fact that it doesn't have space to perform the welfare functions it undertakes elsewhere in the region, as these needs are largely satisfied by the state, in Doha's archetypal rentier system.[960] Even if it had wished to challenge the Qatari state, the Brotherhood could not exploit socio-political or socio-economic vulnerabilities and internal fault lines.

Rather, the Brotherhood exploited the external fault lines between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in terms of religious identity.[961] Qatar's ruling family adheres to the Hanbali Islamic school, an interpretation close to Salafi and Wahhabi creeds, and prides itself to descend from the same Central Arabian tribal group as Wahhabism's founder, Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab.[962] On the other hand, this identity represents an extremely tight link to Saudi Arabia.[963] The Brotherhood could therefore be useful as a counterweight to Wahhabism, as supporting the Brotherhood and employing its members was essential to diversify Qatar's religious identity and limit the level of influence that Saudi scholars, jurists - and, therefore, rulers - would have exercised on Qatari schools and institutions.

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[957] David Roberts, "Qatar and the Brotherhood", *Survival*, 56:4, 2014, pp. 23-32.
[958] "Gloom Grips Qatar's Arab Riviera after Alcohol Ban," *The Guardian*, 21 February 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/21/qatar-arab-riviera-gloom-alcohol-ban. (accessed 14 July 2018).
[959] Freer. "Rentier Islamism in the absence of elections", p.488
[960] See for instance: Kamrava. *Qatar: Small state, big politics*; Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring.*
[961] Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood", p. 89
[962] James Dorsey, "Wahhabism vs. Wahhabism: Qatar Challenges Saudi Arabia". Working Paper No. 262, 2013. Retrieved from the Rajaratnam School of International Studies Website: www.rsis.edu.sg, (accessed 14 July 2018)
[963] This concept is explored in Roberts, "Qatar and the Brotherhood".

A senior researcher at the Doha-based Al Jazeera Center for Studies stated to the author: 'The real reason why al-Qaradawi was given such a big platform on Al Jazeera, with his own TV show, is because he could then be a tool to counter-balance Saudi religious authority. Saudi Arabia, self-indetifying as Qatar's big brother and a voice of leadership in Islam, specifically Wahhabi Islam, would otherwise use its religious authority to strongarm Qatar politically as well. Additionally, given how substantively more popular has traditionally been the Brotherhood ideology vis-à-vis Wahhabism at a regional level, and given how extensive and well diffused has been the Brotherhood network, Qatar's privileged relations with Brotherhood scholars also allowed the state to cultivate its standing in the wider Middle East, such as in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.'[964]

In 2011 Qatar's Emir, perceiving no threat to his political stability, looked at the ousting of old regimes and the rise of new political actors as an opportunity to expand his network and influence. Benefitting from consolidated relations with the group, the Qatari government reached out directly to personalities connected to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, channelling support, engaging in a dialogue and building convergences with those who, elected into government between late 2011 and 2012, seemed in the position to shape the region's future.[965] The Qatari leadership had, for instance, long-standing personal connections with Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia's Brotherhood-linked Ennahda party, winning the 2011 elections for the constituent assembly and coming second to the 2014 parliamentary elections.[966] Ghannouchi's son-in-law, Rafik Abdessalem, who spent years in Doha as the head of research at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, became the country's Foreign Minister from 2011 to 2013.[967] Qatar pledged loans of USD 1 billion and additional billions in investments to the new government, becoming the main supporter of post-

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[964] Interview of the author with a senior researcher at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, 26 April 2018.

[965] A Doha-based senior professor of international relations and Gulf studies interviewed by the author in Doha on 14 April 2019 argued that: 'After the Arab Spring, Doha saw the Islamists as being in the strongest position to obtain power, because of their large social traction across the region. The Emir and Prime Minister of Qatar thought they could position themselves well by leveraging their long-standing personal connections with Brotherhood-associated figures. '

[966] Farida Ayari. "Ennahda movement in power: A long path to democracy." *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 2.1-2 (2015): 135-142.

[967] Roberts. "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood", p. 90

revolutionary Tunisia.[968] Likewise, in Libya, Qatar channelled substantial support through the exiled cleric Ali al-Sallabi, a long-term resident of Doha and the son of a founding member of the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Benghazi.[969] However, the main case of Qatari support for Brotherhood-affiliated movements emerging after the Arab Spring was in Egypt. There Doha supported the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi, elected president in June 2012, granting free shipments of liquefied natural gas (LNG), promising tens of billions of dollars in investment, extending loans of similar magnitude to the Central Bank of Egypt to prop up the economy.[970] Moreover, Qatar strongly supported the new government on the political front by setting up a new Al Jazeera channel covering Egyptian politics, in a way favourable to the Morsi government, around the clock, known as Mubasher Misr.[971] Qatar also nurtured links with the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and its associates in Syria. To those groups Qatar devolved the lion share of the billions spent arming Syrian opposition groups between 2011 and 2013.[972] Doha also supported Brotherhood-affiliated candidates politically, such as Ghassan Hitto, who briefly was provisional prime minister of the Syrian government-in-exile.[973] These elements shed light on how Qatar's perceptions of these political actors changed after 2011 at the regional level, shedding a light on the connection with its internal affairs.

Overall, not only the Brotherhood was never perceived as a threat by the Qatari leadership, it was employed over the years – but more intensely in the period after the Arab Spring – as a resource and a political instrument, to significantly raise Qatar's profile in regional politics. A small state placed a bet on a region-

[968] Kristina Kausch. "Foreign funding: post-revolution Tunisia", *Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior*, 2013, http://fride.org/download/WP_Tunisia.pdf (accessed 14 July 2018)

[969] Marc Fisher, "Meet the Architect of the New Libya," *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2011, https://wapo.st/2wTlh6R, (accessed 14 July 2018)

[970] Hesham Al-Awadi. "Islamists in power: the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6.4 (2013): pp. 539-551.

[971] Erin Cunningham, "Egypt's Break with Qatar Could Contribute to a Scorching Summer for Country's Residents," *The Washington Post*, 21 May 2014, https://wapo.st/2fpLgso; Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "Morsi's Win Is Al Jazeera's Loss," *Al-Monitor*, 1 July 2012, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/morsys-win-is-al-jazeeras-loss.html, (all accessed 14 July 2018)

[972] Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," in *Middle Eastern Security, the US Pivot and the Rise of ISIS*, in Toby Dodge and Emile Hokayem, eds., (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), p. 47; Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution," *Financial Times*, 17 May 2013, https://on.ft.com/2eDndEG, (accessed 14 July 2018).

[973] Phillips, *The battle for Syria*.

wide rising political network, and though such bets achieved a major seat at the table in several key countries in transition. However, Qatar's momentum was short-lived. In July 2013 large-scale rallies triggered a *coup d'etat* by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt that put General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in charge of Egypt.[974] Al-Sisi subsequently initiated a crackdown against the Brotherhood in Egypt, crushing the group, and since 2014 offered decisive support to the UAE to militarily and politically fight the Brotherhood and its affiliates in Libya, via their allied militias led by General Khalifa Haftar.[975] As Libya subsequently plunged into a stagnating status of cyclical conflict, the factions linked to the Muslim Brotherhood maintained control over a portion of territory in the Western region of the country while seeing their international support weakening. In Syria, Russia's intervention in the war coupled with US' inertia turned into a row of military victories for the Assad regime and its backers, and a debacle for the Sunni opposition, in particular that linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.[976] Only in Tunisia the Ennahda party continued to hold its place in the country's parliamentary democracy. However, as of 2016, and following to a widely shared decision in their party Congress, Ennahda formally declared a division between religion and politics and the wish to go beyond the Muslim Brotherhood model of political Islam.[977]

Alongside these regional developments, unfavourable to Doha, its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood were also at the center of the intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017. Since 2014, the newly ascended Emir Tamim bin Hamad had to expel a number of Brotherhood figures and significantly downsize Doha's relations with Brotherhood affiliates in the region.[978] However, as corroborated by all interviews conducted in the country, if there is a threat perceived in relation to the Brotherhood, it is that stemming from the neighbouring GCC countries, and their view of the Muslim Brotherhood. The organization instead remains perceived in Doha as a legitimate political actor, legitimated by its vast popularity across the

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[974] Simeon Kerr, "Fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsi Is Blow to Qatari Leadership," *The Financial Times*, 3 July 2013, https://on.ft. com/2hxylFF, (accessed 14 July 2018).
[975] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Nathaniel Barr. "Dignity and dawn: Libya's escalating civil war." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, ICCT, 2015.
[976] Christopher Phillips. "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs"
[977] Hussein Ibish, "'Islamism Is Dead!' Long Live Muslim Democrats", 2 June 2016, *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/opinion/tunisias-new-revolution.html (accessed 14 July 2018).
[978] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters*, p. 134.

region.[979] 'The Muslim Brotherhood, Islah and other affiliates are only hardline Islamists until they get power, then they become pragmatists. After 2011 some, especially in Abu Dhabi, have pushed the narrative of a connection between the Brotherhood and Khomeinism, but this was only a way to discredit Islamists as they were gaining popularity. The notion of a Caliphate may be there in both cases, but the Brotherhood is much more pragmatic in all countries where they are a political force' argued an advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the author in 2018.[980]

7.4 Qatar and the 'jihadi threat'.

Dissecting the perceptions of the Qatari leadership of the jihadi threat after 2011 requires an acknowledgement of the scarce vulnerability of the country to jihadist attacks combined with the high vulnerability of the country's cherished international reputation to accusations of ties with the jihadi groups themselves. Hence while these groups were not perceived to have the intent or capabilities to pose a political threat to the regime, they had the potential to represent pressing risks.

The accusation of funding terrorism has been the central argument in the narrative pushed by quartet countries against Doha in the context of the 2017 crisis.[981] This narrative was chosen as the central attack line for two reasons: first and foremost, because it would have traction in the Western public opinion, traumatised by a string of terrorist attacks between 2014 and 2016 in Europe and beyond and, subsequently, on Western governments. Secondly because Qatar had already been accused, by international organizations and actors, of displaying a lax attitude to confronting terrorism financing. Most notably, in 2014, the US Department of Treasury's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David Cohen, accused Qatar in a public event of having become

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[979] Interview of the author with a Doha-based senior advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence, Doha, 29 April 2018; Interview of the author with a Qatari academic at Qatar University, Doha, 26 April 2018.
[980] Interview of the author with a Qatari advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018.
[981] Maclean and Kalin "Terrorist financing at heart of Qatar crisis, says UAE minister"; "Qatar must stop supporting terror, Jubeir tells UN", *Saudi Gazette*, 24 September 2017, http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/517879/SAUDI-ARABIA/Qatar (accessed 20 July 2018)

'such a permissive terrorist financing environment, that several major Qatar-based fundraisers act as local representatives for larger terrorist fundraising networks.'[982] These comments echoed concerns expressed over the years by, for instance, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose reports often argued that Qatar had been slow in publishing the relevant legislation and even slower in implementing it. Indeed, in 2008, the IMF reported that terrorist financing was criminalized in Qatar 'in a limited way.'[983]

The first robust law criminalizing terror financing, establishing a Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), and founding a body to check on charities' operations, the Qatari Authority for Charitable Activities (QACA) was passed in Qatar in 2004, three years after 9/11.[984] The following significant piece of legislation, the Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Law, was passed in 2010, requiring Qatar's Public Prosecutor to freeze the funds of terrorist organizations as designated by the United Nations Security Council.[985] However, two years later, not a single money laundering charge had been brought before the courts.[986] In 2013 and 2014, there was a new push on the side of regulations. A law was passed on regulating *hawalas*, and providing regulatory oversight of the charitable sector. While formally the Qatari Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs monitored and licensed charities, and required their foreign partners to submit to a vetting and licensing process, a loophole guaranteed that charities operating from the Qatar Financial Center (QFC) be exempt from the process.[987] However,

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[982] "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for a New American Security on "Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing", 3 April 2014, Press Release, US Department of the Treasury's website, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx (accessed 20 July 2018)

[983] "Qatar: Report on the Observance of Standards and Codes – FATF Recommendations for Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism," IMF Country Report No.08/321, October 2008, http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2008/cr08321.pdf. (accessed 20 July 2018)

[984] "Qatar: Detailed Assessment Report on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism," International Monetary Fund, October 2008, http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2008/cr08322.pdf, (accessed 20 July 2018)

[985] The original text of the law can be viewed at "Law No. 4 Of Year 2010 On Combating Money Laundering And Terrorism Financing", Qatar Central bank website, http://www.qcb.gov.qa/English/Legislation/Law/Pages/LawNo4ofYear2010MLTF.aspx (accessed 20 July 2018)

[986] Jon Truby, "Measuring Qatar's compliance with international standards on money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism", *Journal of Money Laundering Control*, Vol. 19 Issue: 3, 2016, pp.264-277

[987] "Qatar: Detailed Assessment Report on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism."

actions taken in the United States in late 2013 spurred Qatar to ramp up its anti-terror policies. Not only did the US State Department describe Qatar's oversight of local donations to foreign organizations as 'inconsistent' and the country's legislation as marred by 'significant gaps', in December that year the Treasury Department added few Qataris to its list of prominent terrorist financers.[988] These included academic and businessman Abd al-Rahman al-Nuaymi, accused of ordering the transfer of nearly USD 600,000 to al-Qa'ida's branch in Syria, of sending over 2 million USD per month to al-Qa'ida in Iraq - which would later morph into Daesh - to al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and to al-Shabab in Somalia. The list also included Muhammad `Abd al-Rahman al-Humayqani, a Yemen-based fundraiser who used his position in the charitable community as a cover for funnelling financial support to AQAP.

Following these reports, and the reputational damage created, Qatar stepped up its engagement with international bodies and partners, including in information exchange, and issued new laws. In 2014, an independent Charities Commission was established, including officials from several ministries as well as stipulating the scrutiny by the Qatar Central Bank on overseas transactions.[989] That same year the Emir approved the Cybercrime Prevention Law, criminalising the use of any information network, including websites and social media, to establish communications with terrorist organizations, promote terrorist activities or solicit or enabling funding.[990] Already in 2015 the law was activated when Qatari authorities shut down the Madad Ahl al-Sham online fundraising campaign, cited by Jabhat al-Nusra in August 2013 as one of the preferred conduits for donations intended to the group.[991] However, that same year, the US Treasury Department added two more Qatari citizens, Abd Al Latif Bin 'Abdallah Salih Muhammad al-Kawari and Sa'd bin Sa'd Muhammad Shariyan al-Ka'bi, to its list of designated

[988] "Country Report on Terrorism 2013", United States Department of State Publication, Bureau of Counterterrorism, July 2014, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/ (accessed 20 July 2018); "Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen," Press Release, US Department of the Treasury website, 18 December 2013, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/jl2249.aspx (accessed 20 July 2018)

[989] Truby, "Measuring Qatar's compliance with international standards on money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism"

[990] Peter Kovessy, "Qatar's Emir signs new cybercrime legislation into law", *Doha News*, 16 September 2014, https://dohanews.co/qatars-emir-signs-law-new-cybercrime-legislation/ (accessed 20 July 2018)

[991] Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security", p.36.

financiers of terrorism, accusing them of raising funds for Jabhat al-Nusra, and al-Qa'ida affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[992] In response to those designations, and as the citizens were added to the UN's al-Qa'ida Sanctions List, the Qatari government froze their assets and imposed travel bans on both.[993] While the US State Department continued to argue that entities and individuals within Qatar served as a source of financial support for extremist groups, the steps taken by the government were significant and Qatar was deemed "Compliant or Largely Compliant" in the Second Biennial Update Report of the Middle East North Africa Financial Action Task Force (FATF).[994] In 2015/2016 Qatar also reinforced its participation to bilateral and international initiatives to combat terrorism: Doha became a full partner in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, providing significant support in facilitating U.S. military operations against the group, and played an instrumental role in the adoption of the "Doha Declaration," committing the international community to focus on education to prevent extremism and crime, and pledging USD 49 million to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to deliver related projects.[995]

Several factors may help explain what could be seen as a change of attitude on behalf of the Qatari government in its policies around the issue of terrorism financing. In particular one factor that seems relevant is the change of leadership that took place in Qatar in 2013, when Emir Tamim ascended to the throne. The young Emir seemed to have a discontinuous approach to Qatar's regional policy, showing the willingness to scale back Doha's involvement in regional conflicts.[996] Such involvement, especially in Syria, had gradually included the instrumental use of extremist groups to advance political objectives militarily, such as toppling

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[992] "Treasury Designates Financial Supporters of Al-Qaida and Al-Nusrah Front", Press Release, US Department of the Treasury website, 5 August 2015, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0143.aspx (accessed 20 July 2018)

[993] Ibid.

[994] "12th Annual Report of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force for the Year" MENAFAFT, http://www.menafatf.org/sites/default/files/Newsletter/12th%20Annual%20Report%202016.pdf (accessed 20 July 2018)

[995] The text of the Doha Declaration can be viewed on the website of the UNDOC at: "Thirteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. Doha, 12-19 April 2015", https://www.unodc.org/documents/congress//Documentation/ACONF222_L6_e_V1502120.pdf (accessed 20 July 2018)

[996] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters,* p. 52.

the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. This was a key objective for Qatar's former Emir Hamad bin Khalifa who, consistently with his positions on the Arab Spring, in January 2012 became the first Arab leader to support a military intervention in Syria against Assad.[997] A few months later, the international press started to publish news that Qatar, alongside Saudi Arabia, had engaged in sending funds and arms to the Free Syrian Army.[998] In late 2012 Qatar hosted the Syrian opposition meeting where the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, an umbrella of different opposition factions, was established.[999] While Qatar favoured the Syrian affiliates to the Muslim Brotherhood, these candidates quickly emerged as not politically credible or sufficiently influential with on-the-ground opposition groups.[1000] Partly also as a consequence of this inability to deliver political results, and amid international and regional pressures, primary responsibility engagement with the Syrian opposition passed from Qatar to Saudi Arabia in April 2013.[1001] At the same time, individuals in Qatar saw a chance to defeat the Assad regime into the extremist Sunni militias, including Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra.[1002] Jabhat al-Nusra's leader was even hosted for several interviewes on Al Jazeera and the group, regionally regarded as one of the most effective fighting forces in Syria, was allegedly engaged by Qatari benefactors as well as officials, who wanted to convince it to cut links with al-Qa'ida, something that they did in 2016.[1003] As local, regional and international dynamics emerged in discouraging Qatar from pursuing assertive policies in Syria, including Russia's intervention in the war and

[997] Phillips. *The battle for Syria.*

[998] Martin Chulov, "Qatar crosses the Syrian Rubicon: £63m to buy weapons for the rebels" *The Guardian*, 1 March 2012,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/01/syria-conflict-rebels-qatar-weapons
(accessed 20 July 2018)

[999] "The Syrian National Coalition: Motivations for its Formation and Building Blocks of Success", Policy Analysis Unit, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 11 December 2012,
https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The_Syrian_National_Coalition_Motivations_for_its_Formation_and_Building_Blocks_of_Success.aspx (accessed 20 July 2018)

[1000] Phillips, "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs".

[1001] Mariam Karouny, "Saudi edges Qatar to control rebel support." *Reuters*, 31 May 2013
www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531
(accessed 20 July 2018)

[1002] David Roberts, "Is Qatar bringing the Nusra Front in from the cold?", *BBC*, 6 March 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31764114 (accessed 20 July 2018)

[1003] Ibid.

the 2014 intra-GCC crisis, a string of terrorist attacks in the region, Europe and beyond, definitely changed Qatar's perspective on even critically engaging with extremist groups.

A new momentum in Qatar's policies on countering extremist groups came around to dispel the narrative pushed by the quartet during the 2017 GCC crisis. Already in July 2017, one month after the crisis, the Qatari Emir issued a new decree broadening the definition of terrorist activities, and creating two national terrorism lists with set rules for listing proscribed individuals and groups.[1004] The two blacklists were published by the Ministry of Interior's National Counter Terrorism Committee in October 2017 and March 2018 respectively.[1005] The first one included eleven Yemeni citizens associated either with Daesh or al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, and two Yemeni organizations, including Rahma Charity, an organization contained in the blacklists published by the quartet at the eve of the 2017 intra-GCC crisis. The second one included eleven Qatari citizens - four of whom had been blacklisted by the UN and the quartet - two Saudi citizens, two Jordanian citizens - also backlisted by the UN and the quartet - and four Egyptians, plus four Qatari, one Yemeni and one Egyptian organizations, all charged with financing terrorism. While a few names overlap with the quartet's blacklists, Qatar's lists did not include key figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt, Qatar or Libya, vocally targeted by the quartet.

Despite these provisions, the mixed records in Qatar's past policies to prevent terrorism financing, together with the temptations to instrumentally use extremist organizations for foreign policy objectives in Syria, suggest that Qatar's post-2011 perceptions of jihadi organizations might be better grasped through a nuanced approach. First and foremost it is worth noting that terrorist activity has historically been very low in Qatar. In fact, the country has been assessed to have a very low vulnerability to terrorist attacks: for instance Qatar has repeatedly scored around the zero in the Global Terrorism Index measuring vulnerability to

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[1004] "Qatari emir amends laws to bolster fight against terrorism: agency" *Reuters*, 20 July 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-emir-idUSKBN1A52VY (accessed 20 July 2018)
[1005] "National Terrorist Designation Lists" on the website of the State of Qatar's Ministry of Interior National Counter Terrorism Committee website, https://nctc.moi.gov.qa/en/list2.html (accessed 19 July 2018)

terrorism every year between 2014 to 2017.[1006] Some of the conditions that favoured the rise of domestic terrorism, such as heated inter-sectarian relations that have invited attacks by Daesh in Saudi Arabia, are not present in the country. Moreover, Qatar's demographics allows for a comprehensive monitoring of the population, backed by an assertive posture adopted by the State Security Bureau, the body tasked with preventing and disrupting terrorism-related activities. The country has restrictive immigration policies, screening passengers in transit as well as conducting extensive vetting and background checks on all applicants for work visas.[1007] The attractiveness of terrorist groups to Qatari citizens has also been relatively low, as unofficial estimates indicate that, for instance, only a dozen militants allegedly joined Daesh from Qatar.[1008] A senior professor of international relations and Gulf studies interviewed by the author in 2019 argued that 'Among Qataris there was initially some sympathy for the regional, political goals of jihadi organizations, especially in Syria. However, it quickly faded away once more information about the cruelty and extreme violence of the groups became available.'[1009]

All considered, Qatar would seem to be scarcely vulnerable to terrorism, and this has largely reflected in the scarce mention of the topic as a domestic threat in public discourse and the media. To Qatar, jihadi organizations remain a risk rather than a threat capable to damage regime's stability, and, specifically, an external risk. 'Qatar does not face the same internal security threat from Daesh that other regional actors do' writes, among others, Andrew Hammond in 2014.[1010] This has been validated often by public statements by Qatari officials describing Daesh as a threat to the region rather than to their own country.[1011]

[1006] The Global Terrorism Index reports, published by the Sydney-based Institute of Economics and Peace, can be viewed at http://economicsandpeace.org/reports/. (accessed 20 July 2018)
[1007] "Country Report on Terrorism 2016", United States Department of State Publication, Bureau of Counterterrorism, July 2017, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272232.htm (accessed 20 July 2018)
[1008] Benmelech and Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?"
[1009] Interview of the author with a Doha-based senior professor of international relations and Gulf studies, Doha, 14 April 2019.
[1010] Andrew Hammond "Qatar's risky balancing act", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 2014, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_qatar_sees_is_as_threat_to_saudi_arabia_not_doha324 (accessed 20 July 2018)
[1011] "ISIS remains mortal threat to Middle East, Qatari envoy warns" *The Washington Times*, 31 January 2018, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jan/31/isis-still-mortal-threat-middle-east-qatar-foreign/, (accessed 20 July 2018)

When asked about the threat posed by jihadi organizations to their country, Qatari sources interviewed by the author in 2018, dismissed it as relatively uncritical.[1012] On the other hand, the suspected ties between high-profile individuals in Qatar and extremist groups have damaged the 'Brand Qatar'.[1013] Qatar has carefully tried to build an image as an international business hub, and thus both the degradation of security in the wider GCC at the hands of jihadi organizations and the associations of prominent Qataris as backers of such groups may translate into a potential economic risk for Qatar.

7.5 Qatar's security priorities after 2011

As a Doha-based senior advisor to Qatar's Ministry of Defence put it in a 2018 interview with the author: 'In 2017, the Qatari leadership perceived a real, full-fledged security threat of the likes that hadn't been perceived for a very long time in Doha. The intra-GCC crisis and how it was managed reminded them of the main challenge for Qatar's security: that it is a small country, surrounded by big neighbours with an expansionist, hegemonic policy'.[1014] In fact, there was a consensus among Qatari sources interviewed by the author that Qatar's neighbors - first and foremost Saudi Arabia, but also the UAE – emerged, between 2014 and 2017, as the main sources of threats in the perceptions of Doha's leadership.

As analysed thorough this thesis, open competition among the GCC states, and a related sense of animosity, worsened in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and escalated in the following months before erupting into the 2014 intra-GCC crisis. Within eight months of young Emir Tamim taking over, in February 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in an open display of their irritation with Doha's policies. Moreover, in Riyadh, Manama and Abu Dhabi, there was a strong belief that Father Emir Sheikh Hamad and other

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[1012] Interview of the author with a Doha-based think tank Director, Skype, 17 May 2018; Interview of the author with a Qatari advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with Qatari scholar of security studies, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with a European diplomat based in Doha, Doha, 30 April 2018.

[1013] Elizabeth Dickinson, "The case against Qatar." *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2014, http://foreign- policy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/ (accessed 20 July 2018).

[1014] Interview of the author with a Qatari advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018.

powerful family members, such as former Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr al-Thani, the architects of Doha's maverick policies, were still leading the country from behind the scenes.[1015] Already in 2014, media in the quartet countries had hinted at possible escalatory options that included sealing Qatar's only land border, with Saudi Arabia, something that was executed three years later.[1016] The Doha-based advisor at the Ministry of Defence interviewed by the author added that the Qatari military then was prepared for further escalations, including on the military front. At that time, according to President Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting, Ben Rhodes, only pressures from the US prevented such escalation.[1017] To placate its neighbors, Doha signed the Riyadh Agreements via Kuwaiti mediation, expelled a few exponents of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Amr Darrag, the Egyptian Brotherhoods's foreign relations officer, and Gamal Abdul Sattar, the former deputy head of Egypt's religious affairs directorate, and scaled back its involvement in regional politics.[1018] Although Doha didn't cut relations with the Brotherhood, from its perspective, the leadership believed it had made all the necessary compromises to repair relations with its neighbours.[1019]

When, three years later, a new and much graver crisis erupted, the perception in Doha was that its GCC neighbours had taken advantage of an opportunity provided by a different White House administration, that of Donald Trump, to pursue a much more hostile scheme.[1020] In an interview for *The Washington Post* dated February 2018, Qatar's Defence Minister, Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah, declared that the UAE and Saudi Arabia had intentions to intervene militarily against Qatar in June 2017.[1021] A year later Saudi King Salman allegedly

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[1015] Interview with a former Saudi diplomat, London, 19 May 2018; Interview with an Emirati official within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail, 19 May 2018.
[1016] Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the global ambitions of a city-state.*
[1017] Susan Glasser, "The Full Transcript: Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power" Podcast, *The Global Politico*, 15 January 2018, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/15/the-full-transcript-ben-rhodes-and-samantha-power-216322 (accessed 26 July 2018)
[1018] Black, "Qatar-Gulf deal forces expulsion of Muslim Brotherhood leaders".
[1019] Interview of the author with a consultant at Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018.
[1020] Ibid.
[1021] Lally Weymouth, "Qatar to Saudi Arabia: Quit trying to overthrow our government", *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2018,

reiterated the intention to intervene militarily should Qatar acquire the S-400 anti-aircraft missiles from Russia.[1022] The Defence Minister then stated: 'They have tried everything. They tried to provoke the tribes. They used mosques against us. Then they tried to get some puppets to bring in and replace our leaders.'[1023] These few sentences sum up and voice the dominant perspective in Doha, that the main goal of the crisis was replacing the seating Emir with a more docile candidate, who would throw Doha's financial and political capital behind the regional policy choices of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. 'Saudi Arabia wanted to turn Qatar into another Bahrain: a Saudi province with no sovereignity', stated a senior researcher at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies.[1024] According to several Qatari sources, this was a long-term objective of Saudi Arabia, that attempted to keep Qatar in its shadows since the country's establishment in 1971.

At that time, overseeing Qatar's independence was Emir Ahmed bin Ali al-Thani, unseated six months later by a candidate from a different branch of the al-Thani family, Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani. Emir Khalifa had a conciliatory approach to regional politics, seeking to ensure the security of small and militarily weak Qatar by aligning closely and comprehensively with its 'big brother' Riyadh, i.e. 'bandwagoning'.[1025] However, already under Khalifa's rule, the influential Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa had been working to diversify Qatar's relations in order to create space for a more independent foreign policy, moving from 'bandwagoning' to 'hedging'.[1026] Amid the prospect of an Arab-Iranian détente, pursued by Iran's President Rafsanjani, Hamad agreed to build a pipeline from Iran's Karun mountains to import fresh water to Qatar.[1027] In the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, Hamad also attempted to upgrade Qatar-Israel relations.[1028] Most importantly, in 1992, Qatar signed a defence cooperation agreement with the

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/qatar-to-saudi-arabia-quit-trying-to-overthrow-our-government/2018/02/02 (accessed 26 July 2018)

[1022] "Saudi threatens military action if Qatar deploys anti-aircraft missiles: report", *Reuters*, 2 June 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-qatar-france/saudi-threatens-military-action-if-qatar-deploys-anti-aircraft-missiles-report-idUSKCN1IY0IW (accessed 27 July 2018).

[1023] Weymouth, "Qatar to Saudi Arabia: Quit trying to overthrow our government".

[1024] Interview of the author with a senior researcher at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, 26 April 2018.

[1025] Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State*, pp. 18-22.

[1026] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters*, p. 83.

[1027] "Iran, Qatar Consider Huge Water Pipeline Project," *Reuters*, 11 November 1991.

[1028] Uzi Rabi, "Qatar's relations with Israel: challenging Arab and Gulf norms." *The Middle East Journal* 63.3 (2009): pp. 443-459.

United States that included a transfer of US military personnel from Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid Air Base, not far from the royal palace in Doha.[1029] That same year, border skirmishes between Saudi Arabia and Qatar broke out in Khafus.[1030] In 1995, Hamad took over from his father in a bloodless coup. Qatar's neighbours were adamant at the time that Sheikh Khalifa be returned to his position, acutely aware of the challenge represented by Hamad.[1031] Saudi Arabia and Bahrain allegedly supported at least one counter coup, enlisting dozens of members from the al-Ghufran branch of the al-Murrah tribe, the largest tribe in Qatar and one that has both Qatari and Saudi connections, to overthrow the new Emir.[1032]

Once the counter-coup was foiled, Emir Hamad consolidated his position and doubled-down on making controversial decisions and devoting his efforts to disenfranchising Qatar from Riyadh's shadow. In 1996, a milestone in this project was the establishment of the global satellite network Al Jazeera. While Al Jazeera was founded primarily to boost the state's soft power, it was also a vehicle to undermine Saudi Arabia's regional leadership: the channel started hosting Saudi dissidents and putting into question Saudi policies to the point that Riyadh removed its Ambassador from Doha in 2002 and for six years as a way of pressuring Qatar.[1033] Additionally, Hamad was the man behind the idea of developing Qatar's LNG industry and becoming a major energy source for the world's most powerful states, for instance supplying the United Kingdom with one-third of its LNG imports and China with one-fifth, among others.[1034] Coupled with steadily rising oil and gas prices, especially the price boom of the early 2000s, Doha could rely on huge revenues to invest in strategic assets around the world, creating an internationally recognisable brand for Qatar. Financial resources were also a key instrument in a diplomatic offensive, dubbed *riyal-politik*, that allowed Qatar to broker high-profile deals in the first decade of 2000, as well as play out its post-Arab Spring strategy. It is in this context that decision-

[1029] Brahim Saidy. "Qatari-US military relations: context, evolution and prospects." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10.2 (2017): pp. 286-299.
[1030] Michael Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux", *The Century Foundation*, 28 February 2017, https://tcf.org/content/report/arab-cold-war-redux/ , (accessed 27 July 2018). The piece provides an excellent overbiew of Qatar's policy during the Arab Spring.
[1031] Interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat, 19 May 2018, London.
[1032] "Life sentences for Qatari coup plotters", *BBC*.
[1033] Interview of the author with a former Saudi diplomat, 19 May 2018, London.
[1034] Kamrava. *Qatar: Small state, big politics*.

makers in Doha look at the decision to close all land and sea borders between Qatar and its neighbours in 2017.

In fact, it was highly probable that the measures might have prevented Qatar from exporting its LNG cargoes, cutting off the main source of revenues for the state, in 2016 depending on hydrocarbon revenue for over 70 percent.[1035] When, on June 5th, vessels flying the Qatari flag, coming from or going to Qatar, were not allowed to transit through the UAE's territorial waters or call at Emirati ports, which serve as regional bunkering or re-fueling hubs, Qatar's energy industry risked to be crippled. Only Iran's willingness to allow transit through its territorial waters and Oman's willingness to welcome vessels in its ports, allowed Qatar to preserve its fundamental energy trade. This was also possible due to the political posture of the big Asian and European powers depending on Qatari gas, including China, Japan and the United Kingdom, keen on avoiding disruptions to their supplies.[1036] However, the re-routing of energy trade, came with costs that had to be sustained by the Qatari state. Similarily, re-arranging imports away from the land border with Saudi Arabia, was a challenge. Approximately 80 percent of Qatar's food needs transited through that border and the Qatari government had to quickly arrange air-lifting food, as well as other goods, from Turkey and Iran, with a significant increase in expenditure.[1037] The financial sector was also impacted, as banks from the quartet began removing term deposits held in Qatar. Three months after the crisis, rating agency Moody's stated that Qatar had injected more than $40bn out of its state reserves to support its economy and financial system, and Qatar's Sovereign Wealth Fund, Qatar Investment Authority, had liquidated foreign assets for more than USD 20bn, to inject them in the domestic banking system.[1038] Although, a year later, economic data showed the resilience of Qatar's financial system as well as its domestic

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[1035] "Qatar: Selected Issues", IMF Country Report No. 17/89, *International Monetary Fund*, April 2017.

[1036] "Japanese Firms Watching Warily as Qatar Crisis Unfolds," *Japan Times*, June 11, 2017; Andrew Ward and David Shappard, "Qatar Diplomatic Spat Reignites UK Gas Supplies Fears," *Financial Times*, 12 June 2017.

[1037] Sara Fouad Almohamadi, "Qatar dispute exposes regional food-security failures", Analysis, *International Institute for Security Studies*, 21 August 2017, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2017/08/qatar-food-insecurity (accessed 27 July 2018)

[1038] "Moody's: Diplomatic row is credit negative for all GCC members; Qatar and Bahrain most exposed" Announcement, *Moody's Investors Service*, 21 October 2017, https://www.moodys.com/research/Moodys-Diplomatic-row-is-credit-negative-for-all-GCC-members--PR_372581 (accessed 27 July 2018)

economy, with the GDP growing by approximately 2 percent, there is no denying that such resilience required diverting financial resources inwards.[1039] This was perceived as one of the key objectives of the quartet in Doha: by draining the surplus in Qatari resources invested in its regional *riyal-politik*, the quartet aimed at downsizing, if not neutralising, Qatar's role in regional politics.[1040] In addition, creating economic and financial damage was perceived in Qatar as a way to induce members of the al-Thani royal family, heavily invested in international business, to support an alternative candidate to the throne or to pressure Emir Tamim to comply with the quartet's demands.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have pushed and supported alternative, more accomodating, figures within Qatar's al-Thani royal family as challengers to the throne. Already in June 2017, Abu Dhabi's *The National* promoted a little known descendent from Emir Sheikh Ahmed Bin Ali, who was deposed in 1972, Sheikh Saud Bin Nasser al-Thani as 'Qatar's leading opposition figure'.[1041] As months went by, other royal dissidents were presented as legitimate heirs, most of them having strong commercial interests in Saudi Arabia and being willing to publicly back the quartet's measures against Doha, including Sultan bin Suhaim al-Thani and Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali al-Thani.[1042] The aim was to provide the al-Thani royal family - as well as the Qatari population and tribes - with a new leader to pledge their loyalty to. As with regards to the royal family, in the beginning, the intra-GCC crisis did elicit an internal dispute, with some members recommending Qatar's full acceptance of the quartet's demands and others advocating accepting Iranian protection.[1043] A senior professor of international relations and

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[1039] "Qatar: Year in Review 2017", Economic News, *Oxford Business Group*, 21 December 2017, https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/qatar-year-review-2017 (accessed 27 July 2018)

[1040] Interview of the author with a Doha-based think tank Director, Skype, 17 May 2018; Interview of the author with a Qatari advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with Qatari academic at Qatar University, Doha, 26 April 2018; Interview of the author with a senior researcher at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, 26 April 2018.

[1041] "Qatar should stop funding terrorism, says leading opposition figure", *The National*, 3 June 2017, https://www.thenational.ae/world/qatar-should-stop-funding-terrorism-says-leading-opposition-figure-1.52119 (accessed 27 July 2018)

[1042] Andreas Krieg, "The threat of regime change 2.0 to GCC unity", *Middle East Eye*, 13 October 2017, (accessed 27 July 2018)

[1043] "Qatar: Al-Thanis divided over future direction", Issue 1039, *Gulf States News,* 22 June 2017, https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/%EF%BB%BFQatar+Al-Thanis+split+over+policy+and+management+style.aspx?date=20170622&docNo=47&qid=2&page=5 (accessed 25 July 2018).

Gulf studies interviewed by the author in 2019 stated that: 'The al-Thanis used to be the most fractious royal family in the GCC so when the crisis erupted there was the concrete possibility that a challenger of the Emir would emerge among the family. But instead they closed ranks.'[1044] While Emir Hamad had a policy of keeping his inner family circle tight, including by giving out government positions and wealth, Emir Tamim chose a cabinet with the fewest royal family members compared to past governments, preferring technocrats, and centralised oversight in his office (Diwan).[1045] However, despite the divergences, the family by and large stood behind Emir Tamim, also encouraged by the strong popular support shown towards the Emir, as the crisis triggered an outpouring of 'rally-round-the-flag' nationalism.[1046]

While the population was, largely speaking, cohesive in its loyalty to the incumbent rulers, the leadership in Doha did perceive a social dimension in the threat posed by the intra-GCC crisis, in terms of the attempt to target tribal unity. In particular, a red flag was raised after a meeting between leaders of the al-Murrah tribe, the same clan involved in the 1996 attempted coup, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in Jeddah in the summer of 2017.[1047] Tribal leader Sheikh Taleb Bin Lahom Bin Shuraim, who was among those meeting the Saudi Crown Prince, later stated in an interview with Dubai-based, Saudi-owned outlet *Al-Arabiya*, that the Qatari authorities had turned Qatar into a 'haven for terrorists and their sponsors'.[1048] In a widely circulated video, a Qatari royal dissident denounced the Qatari Emir before thousands of tribesmen assembled on the Saudi-Qatar border. 'While the state has largely coopted Qatari tribes over the decades, by granting them access to resources and validation of

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[1044] Interview of the author with a Doha-based senior professor of international relations and Gulf studies, Doha, 14 April 2019
[1045] "Qatar: Regime change for Tamim?", *Gulf States News*, Issue 1040, 06 July 2017, https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/%EF%BB%BFQatar+Regime+change+in+Doha+Tamim+stands+firm+against+Al-Thani+alternatives.aspx?date=20170706&docNo=43&qid=2&page=5 (accessed 25 July 2018)
[1046] David Roberts, "Qatar's Domestic Stability and the Gulf Crisis" Policy Watch 2847, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 18 August 2017.
[1047] "Qatar: Al-Murrah citizenship revocations" *Gulf States News,* Issue 1044, 21 September 2017, https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/Head+of+Al-Murrah+in+Qatar+loses+citizenship.aspx?date=20170921&docNo=35&qid=2&page=4 (accessed 25 July 2018)
[1048] "Head of al-Murrah tribe confirms Qatar revokes family's citizenship", *Al Arabiya*, 14 September 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/09/14/Head-of-al-Marri-tribe-confirms-Qatar-revokes-family-s-citizenship.html (accessed 27 July 2018)

their tribal identity, there was considerable sensitivity in 2017 towards tribal groups. The Emir forbade tribes to celebrate Qatar's National Day divided by clan and had them celebrate altogether to provide a show of unity and highlight their allegiance to the Qatari state. Given how most tribes in Qatar originally come from Saudi Arabia and how many have maintained relations with the Kingdom, they were looked upon with suspicion.'[1049] Consequently, in September 2017, 55 members of the al-Murrah tribe were stripped of Qatari citizenship.[1050] As an extreme measure used to punish disloyalty, the revocation of the citizenship highlights how the instrumentalization of cross-border tribes employed as socio-political ammunition against a government remains perceived as a source of serious intermestic risk for the leadership in Qatar.

In conclusions, the intra-GCC crises, and the initiatives pursued by the quartet countries, have been perceived in Doha as a substantial external threat, intended to become an intermestic one. The quartet countries, from Doha's perspective, targeted the regime's stability and identity, as well as the functional integrity of the country's boundaries and its institutions. Politically, the quartet countries initiated a campaign intended to damage the image of the Qatari leadership at the domestic, regional and international level, by arguing, in international media and fora, that Doha was a major supporter of terrorism. They directly challenged the regime's stability and identity, when proposing alternative candidates for the throne, while questioning the political and religious legitimacy of the seating Emir, as well as his capacity to govern. Sealing all land, sea and air borders with Qatar, and cutting all economic and financial relations, also given the level of integration of the GCC economies, they posed a substantial economic threat. Though the rumours and intimidations of a possible military invasion, they added a military dimension in the perceptions of the Qatari regime, which in fact invested in 2018 in upgrading its air defences capabilities.[1051] Finally, the attempt of involving cross-border tribes in the dispute was perceived as adding a social dimension to the threat, for its potential to disrupt the national fabric of Qatar. The fact that the Qatari population, generally speaking, seemed to remain receptive to the

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[1049] Interview of the author with a Qatari researcher specialised on political sociology in Qatar, London, 5 February 2019.
[1050] "Qatar: Al-Murrah citizenship revocations" *Gulf States News*.
[1051] "Qatar: Boost to air defences", Issue 1056, *Gulf States News*, 22 March 2018, https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/%EF%BB%BFQatar+Boost+to+air+defences.aspx?date=20180322&docNo=15&qid=2&page=2 (accessed 27 July 2017).

leadership's message of unity at the most vulnerable moment in contemporary politics, was evidence that, similarly to what happened during the 2011 Arab uprisings, threats do not easily propagate from the regional to the domestic level in Qatar, where socio-economic and socio-political vulnerabilities are, largely speaking, contained. On the other hand, the experience of the crisis has indoubtedly heightened, for the Doha regime, the perception of geopolitical vulnerability to exogenous dangers, viewed as capable to affect the country at a number of different levels.

8.0 CHAPTER EIGHT: KUWAIT.

Kuwait's posture in the context of the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises is particularly relevant to the theme of this thesis. Rather than aligning with the anti-Qatar bloc, as mentioned, Kuwait has served as the principal mediator between the parties both in 2014 and 2017.[1052] In October 2017 Kuwait's Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Ṣabah declared to the National Assembly, Kuwait's Parliament, that: 'Contrary to our wishes and hopes, the Gulf crisis has the potential of escalating. Therefore, all of us must be fully aware of its potential consequences. (…) Any escalation will bring with it an outright call for regional and international intervention, which will destroy the security of the Gulf and its people.'[1053] Kuwait's hypersensitive position vis-à-vis a possible escalation could be explained by dissecting its leadership's security perceptions on the issues at the centre of the crisis, amid the background of the country's geopolitical profile, its history, and the experience with the Arab Spring.

Kuwait is a small country: in 2018 Kuwait's Central Statistical Bureau estimated the country's total population to be 4,226,920 - with immigrants accounting for more than 69.5 percent[1054] - and a diverse national fabric, including a large Shi'a minority of roughly 28 percent of the population.[1055] The country borders two of the largest players in the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and is located very proximate to Iran. In its history, Kuwait has suffered repercussions from the confrontation between these larger players, or their ambitions, and consistently built its security perceptions around them.[1056] For instance, according to a Kuwaiti professor specialised in sectarianism, 'The impact of the Iran-Iraq war in Kuwait was formidable. In the 1980s it wasn't rare to see the Shi'a houses with pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini on the wall, and the Sunnis' with pictures of Saddam

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[1052] Alajmi. "The Gulf Crisis: An Insight Into Kuwait's Mediation Efforts.".
[1053] "Kuwait emir warns of GCC collapse and crisis escalation", *Al Jazeera*, 24 October 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/kuwait-emir-warns-gcc-collapse-crisis-escalation-171024122229727.html (accessed 28 March 2018)
[1054] Data on Kuwait's social fabric are taken by the official website of the Central Statistical Bureau available at: https://www.csb.gov.kw/Default_EN.aspx
[1055] Falah al-Mdaires. *Islamic Extremism in Kuwait: from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al-Qaeda and other Islamic Political Groups* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 76.
[1056] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Kuwait: Recovery and security after the Gulf War.* (New York: Routledge), 1997.

Hussein.'[1057] The most pressing security trauma suffered by the country, embedded in its collective memory, has been the invasion by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in 1990.[1058] The current Emir was, at the time, in the position of Foreign Minister, a capacity in which he served between 1963 and 2003, until he became the country's leader in 2006. A few years earlier, in 1981, he had played a key role in the very founding of the GCC, which, as previously discussed, was conceived as a defence mechanism against regional threat.[1059] This was especially so in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, that triggered a string of terrorist attacks within Kuwait.[1060] The idea that GCC unity is key to confront common challenges, has remained a centrepiece of the Emir's discourse on the most recent crises as well.[1061]According to several interviewees, the Emir's professional background strongly impacts his security calculus and perception of threats.[1062] A Kuwaiti historian interviewed in 2019 stated that: 'Due to his central role in the history of regional integration at the level of the Arab Gulf monarchies, Emir Sabah has consistently seen GCC unity as a shield from regional instability and opposed the institution's shattering led by a younger generation of leaders.'[1063] A professor of international relations at Kuwait University stated: 'The Emir has remained, at his heart, a diplomat. He believes that fragmentation is thoroughly negative for Kuwait and that he could leverage his decades-long political experience on the international scene, and the respect that his seniority gives him with his counterparts in the region, to mediate the intra-GCC crises.'[1064]

In the Riyadh Agreements, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain identified Iran and Iran-backed Shi'a actors, jihadi and Islamist groups as forces capable of

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[1057] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism in Kuwait, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018

[1058] Michael S. Casey, *The History of Kuwait*. (Greenwood Publishing Group), 2007.

[1059] Casey, *The History of Kuwait*

[1060] Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*

[1061] "GCC cooperation vital to face growing threats—Kuwait Emir", *Gulf News*, 8 January 2018, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/gcc-cooperation-vital-to-face-growing-threats-kuwait-emir-1.2153520, (accessed 28 March 2018)

[1062] Interview of the author with a Kuwait government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018. Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City, Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti historian, Skype, 20 January 2019; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018.

[1063] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti historian, Skype, 20 January 2019.

[1064] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018.

disrupting regional security. By cutting relations with Qatar over these groups, the three GCC states framed the danger posed by those groups as more pressing than the insecurity potentially deriving from weakening GCC unity. On the contrary, by insisting on finding a compromise and repairing GCC unity, Kuwait somehow de-prioritised those three actors as sources of threat. The hypothesis here advanced will be that the Kuwaiti regime holds divergent perceptions vis-à-vis those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain regarding the degree to which the three aforementioned actors represent compelling and pressing security threats. These perceptions will be dissected, through the prism of this thesis' theoretical framework, in the three central paragraphs of this chapter, preceded by a paragraph looking at the impact of the Arab Spring, the related socio-economic and socio-political vulnerabilities and how they might inform the leadership's perceptions. In the final paragraph, this chapter will argue that the - further - polarization of regional politics, making regional players more aggressive, is perceived as the major threat to Kuwait's security by its leadership.

8.1 Kuwait and the Arab Spring.

The protests erupted in 2011 in Kuwait cannot be singled out from a much longer tradition of political movements meant to counter-balance the power of the royal family, sporadically surfacing since the beginning of the 20th century.[1065] The latest string of political activism can be dated back at least to the ascension of Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber to power in 2006.[1066] That same year a group of Kuwaiti youth started organising public protests calling for the amendment of the electoral system, to reduce the number of constituencies from twenty-five to five, as they believed that smaller district sizes provided the regime with a better chance of corrupting voters to influence the elections' results.[1067] A few hundred men and women started gathering - many wearing orange t-shirts and waving orange flags, hence the name Orange Movement – in key locations around

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[1065] Mary Ann Tétreault, *Stories of democracy: Politics and society in contemporary Kuwait.* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2000.

[1066] Bodour Behbehani, "Surviving the Arab Spring: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Case Study of Kuwait (2011–2012)", Unpublished PhD thesis, Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, King's College London, 2016.

[1067] Hamad Albloshi and Faisal Alfahad. "The Orange Movement of Kuwait: civic pressure transforms a political system." in Maria Stephan (ed.) *Civilian Jihad.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2009, pp.219-232.

Kuwait, including Saif Palace.[1068] Having put forward an unsuccessful attempt at compromising, and in the face of the MPs' intention to grill the Prime Minister Skheikh Nasser Mohammed Al-Sabah, something unprecedented, on the issue, the Emir dissolved the Parliament.[1069] Government supporters failed to win enough seats in the new parliament and the electoral law was changed to reduce the number of districts to five. However, allegations of corruption, gerrymandering and bribing continued, and crystallised around the figure of the Prime Minister, who, in the words of a young Kuwaiti activist, 'used to conspire with the merchants to buy MPs, using the National Assembly to further particular interests upsetting the constitutional dynamics on power-sharing in Kuwait'.[1070]

MPs attempted to impeach the Prime Minister, staunchly shielded by the Emir, six times between 2006 and 2009, when the campaign coalesced around a second social movement named Irhal (Leave).[1071] Kuwaiti youth groups of liberal inspiration, such as Kafi (Enough) and al-Soor al-Khames (Fifth Fence), joined the protests since March 2011.[1072] Crucially, the corruption suspicions were aggravated by the dissatisfaction of citizens with the pace of socio-economic development in the country and the deterioration of public services, notwithstanding the average high standard of life.[1073] In spite of a period of high oil prices since the early 2000s, that brought the price of a Kuwaiti oil barrel to almost $110 at the beginning of 2011, the building of infrastructures, such as a new hospital, had been stalled for several years.[1074] Additionally, tens of thousands of families had long been on a waiting list for housing services and power cuts in some poorer suburbs of the capital were common, even during the hottest days of the year.[1075] In addition, the hostility against the Prime Minister

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[1068] Ibid.
[1069] Ibid.
[1070] Interview of the author with a young Kuwaiti activist, Skype, 21 January 2019
[1071] Albloshi and Alfahad. "The Orange Movement of Kuwait", p. 221
[1072] Alnoud Alsharekh, "Youth, protest and the new elite" in Kristian Ulrichsen (ed), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,) 2018.
[1073] A Kuwaiti political economist interviewed by the author in Kuwait City on 11 December 2018 stated: 'Kuwait has a high GDP but the costs of living soared so the purchasing power has declined and young people perceive themselves as poorer than their parents. It is a consequence of the unsustainable rentier political economy.'
[1074] Fahad Al-Zumai, "Kuwait's Political Impasse and Rent-Seeking Behaviour: A Call for Institutional Reform", London School of Economics Kuwait Programme Research Papers, 2013.
[1075] Ibid.

was shared also by the Islamist-leaning opposition, including the political society close to the Muslim Brotherhood (Hadas), who saw Sheikh Nasser's government as too complacent with the Iranian regime at the expense of Kuwait's relations with other GCC countries.[1076] This idea was reinforced by the alignment between the government and the MPs representing Kuwait's Shi'a minority in the National Assembly, who were amongst the few supporting Sheikh Nasser in the face of opposition. Already in June 2011, Islamist opposition MPs questioned the Prime Minister and then entered a motion against his office.[1077] The tipping point was a scandal in September 2011 where it was alleged that close to $350 million (Dh1.28 billion) in public funds had been deposited in personal bank accounts of 15 MPs to secure their vote on crucial issues, in order for them to push the agenda of the ruling al-Sabah family, and the PM was responsible.[1078] This was the trigger to new, larger, stronger and more sustained protests that we could identify as Kuwait's Arab Spring.

For three months, hundreds of citizens protested each week outside of the National Assembly building and, on the night of November 16, hundreds of protestors, led by opposition lawmakers, stormed the building of the National Assembly in a brief raid.[1079] They called for the fall of the Prime Minister, sang the national anthem, and left. It was the climax of the movement, and at least 45 people were later arrested. Hours after the storming of the Parliament, the Emir called an emergency meeting of the cabinet and issued orders to the Ministry of Interior and the National Guard to take all necessary measures to confront 'attempts to undermine the country's public order'. [1080] After 10 days from the raid, the Emir caved in and accepted the resignation of the controversial Prime Minister, and its entire cabinet, and called for new elections in 2012.[1081]

[1076] Alsharekh, "Youth, protest and the new elite."
[1077] Ibid.
[1078] Mary Ann Tétreault, "Bottom-Up Democratization in Kuwait" in Mary Ann Tétreault, Gwenn Okruhlik, and Andrzej Kapiszewski (eds), *Political Change in the Arab Gulf States: Stuck in Transition,* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 2011.
[1079] Kristin Smith Diwan, "Kuwait's constitutional showdown", *Foreign Policy*, 17 November 2011, http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/17/kuwaits-constitutional-showdown/, (accessed 28 March 2018).
[1080] Behbehani, "Surviving the Arab Spring", p. 285
[1081] "Kuwait orders tight security after parliament stormed", *Reuters*, 17 November 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-protest-idUSTRE7AF2RL20111117, (accessed 27 June 2017)

Groups of Kuwaiti youth continued to be active during the electoral campaign, throwing their support behind candidates who would accept their calls for greater political freedom in the country, including the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and the legalisation of political parties.[1082] In this environment, the opposition won thirty-five seats in February 2012 and became the majority in the National Assembly, an unprecedented circumstance in the history of the country.[1083] Musallam al-Barrak, one the most prominent leader in the tribal-Islamist opposition,[1084] won more votes than any politician in Kuwait's history.[1085] However, only four months later, the Constitutional Court declared those elections invalid, basing its decision on a technicality, and reinstated the previous parliament originally elected in 2009, which included more government supporters.[1086] The court ruling immediately revamped protests: on June 27, 2012, tens of thousands of demonstrators took Kuwait City's Erada square and subsequently, opposition MPs blocked the work of Parliament boycotting its sessions, prompting the Emir to dissolve it in October 2012.[1087] Voices spread that the Emir intended to amend the electoral law once again, allowing voters to vote for one candidate instead of four, a system that would push candidates to focus on their own campaigns rather than on building alliances, and which ultimately reduced the opportunity for the opposition to become the majority in the National Assembly.[1088] The rumours triggered two reactions: the creation of another political movement, Karamat Watan (Dignity of the Nation) and a fierce speech given by Musallam al-Barrak, on October 15, 2012, warning the Emir against issuing the decree, considered an authoritarian act.[1089] His words,

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[1082] Behbehani, "Surviving the Arab Spring", p. 302

[1083] Ibid., p. 283

[1084] With the term tribal, we indicate citizens who most strongly identify with their tribal identity and belonging. MPs of tribal background progressively started to identify themselves ideologically as Islamists, including due to a convergence of interests with Islamist traditional groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists. Already in the 2008 elections, most of the 25 tribal candidates elected were affiliated to Islamist movements (particularly the Salafis). See: Rivka Azoulay and Claire Beaugrand. "Limits of political clientelism: elites in Kuwait fragmenting politics", *Arabian Humanities,* 4, 2015.

[1085] Ibid.

[1086] Ibid.

[1087] Sylvia Westall, "Kuwait government calls for dissolution of parliament: KUNA", *Reuters*, 3 October 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-politics-government-idUSBRE8920E620121003, (accessed 28 March 2018).

[1088] Hamad Albloshi and Michael Herb. "Karamet Watan: An Unsuccessful Nonviolent Movement." *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 3 (2018), pp. 408-430.

[1089] Ibid., p. 411

including the famous sentence 'We will not allow you, your highness,' brought upon al-Barrak a sentence of two years imprisonment for criticising the Emir, in breach of Article 54 of the Kuwaiti Constitution which declares the Emir 'immune and inviolable'.[1090] Despite the popularity of the speech, the Emir in fact issued a decree to change the electoral system to 'one person, one vote' his prerogative under a state of national emergency, previously declared and largely contested.[1091] On October 21, 2012 more than 100 protesters were injured as police attempted to break up a demonstration that, according to opposition leaders, was the largest in Kuwait's history with more than 100,000 people taking part.[1092] The al-Sabah family council subsequently released a statement in the state news agency KUNA's English service reading 'His Highness the Crown Prince, in his capacity as President of the Council, would ... like to assert His Highness the Emir's right to be obeyed,' citing a Koranic verse calling on believers to obey the Prophet 'and those charged with authority among you'.[1093] This episode significantly scaled back the protests, that moved from the streets to the political and judiciary chambers of Kuwait's institutions.

Another string of protests took place in Kuwait in 2011, parallel but separate to the ones centered on corruption: the protests of the *bidoons*. Estimated to be 120,000 *bidoons* – Arabic for 'without'– are residents with no citizenship and political rights nor access to public services, all granted to Kuwaiti citizens.[1094] Up until the 1980s the *bidoons* mostly worked, just as the other Kuwaiti citizens, in public sectors, such as energy or security.[1095] Their status changed markedly after the first Gulf War, in 1991, when the Kuwaiti government adopted policies incrementally stripping the *bidoons* of a number of rights.[1096] Since then *bidoons*

[1090] "Barrak Handed Two Years in Prison for Insulting Emir", *Kuwait Times*, 23 February 2015

[1091] Alsharekh in "Youth, protest and the new elite" defines the decision 'controversial' and argues that many of Kuwait's citizens took this direct interference as 'a step too far' at page 168.

[1092] Albloshi and Herb. "Karamet Watan", p. 421

[1093] Sylvia Westall, Kuwait's ruling family calls for obedience to the emir", *Reuters*, 18 October 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-politics-arrests/kuwaits-ruling-family-calls-for-obedience-to-the-emir-idUSBRE89H1CK20121018, (accessed 28 March 2018).

[1094] For a comprehensive look on the condition of the bidoons in Kuwait see: Claire Beaugrand. *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, nationality and society in Kuwait*. (London: IB Tauris), 2017.

[1095] Ibid.

[1096] Ibid.

do not qualify for government jobs, and are thus often forced to low paid, low skilled irregular work in the black market or unemployment.[1097] Their lack of citizenship status also precludes to them the right to government welfare – including free housing, education and healthcare, or to access the conspicuous subsidies offered to the citizens.

On February 19, 2011 a few hundred *bidoons* protested their second-class status in Jahra and Sulaibiya, the northern impoverished periphery of Kuwait City, where many *bidoons* reside.[1098] Security forces used water cannons to disperse demonstrators, who responded by throwing stones. After the demonstrations, approximately thirty people were wounded and fifty were arrested.[1099] Demonstrations continued in March 2011, with marches on the outskirts of Kuwait city and in the southern oil city of Ahmadi. The response of the security forces became even more heavy-handed: protesters were dispersed with tear gas and hundreds of riot police, dozens of armoured vehicles and helicopters were deployed to the *bidoon* areas of Kuwait City.[1100] In December 2011 the government tried to defuse tensions with some concessions, stating that citizenship may be granted to 34,000 out of the estimated 120,000 stateless people living in the country.[1101] The statement, deemed insufficient, prompted a new row of demonstrations, culminating in January 2012 with massive rallies in Jahra and Sulaibiya.[1102] This time the government resorted to draconian measures: the Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad al-Humud al-Sabah announced that the *bidoons* who took part in the protests might be deported, dismissed from the army and the police force, evicted from housing provided by the government.[1103] Other measures included the confiscation of their only form of identification, and the cancellation of their applications for Kuwaiti nationality. Since these measures were adopted, the *bidoons* scaled back their protest

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[1097] Behbehani, "Surviving the Arab Spring", pp. 294 -300
[1098] Ibid.
[1099] Ibid.
[1100] James Calderwood, "Police teargas protesting Kuwaiti stateless", *The National*, 12 March 2011, https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/police-teargas-protesting-kuwaiti-stateless-1.416463
[1101] Behbehani, "Surviving the Arab Spring", p. 294 -300
[1102] Ibid.
[1103] "Kuwait to deport stateless protesters: report", *Al Arabiya*, 17 January 2012, https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/17/188847.html, (accessed 28 March 2018)

movement.[1104] A total of around 200 stateless individuals were arrested on different charges in the period from 2011 to 2013. Despite some rhetorical openings, the government rejected three times the proposal to naturalise a few thousands *bidoons* in the years between 2011 and 2017 and, instead, devised a plan to offer some of them Comoros citizenship with residence permits for Kuwait: they would not be Kuwaiti citizens but would qualify for free education and healthcare.[1105]

The events of 2011 uncovered several vulnerabilities impacting political stability in Kuwait. On the *bidoons*, the harsh crackdown on the community together with the leadership's hesitant and inconclusive policy response to those grievances arguably exposed the magnitude of the socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities that they represent for the regime.[1106] The *bidoons* attempted to underline their nationalism and allegiance to Kuwait's Emir, by 'waving the country's flag and clutching pictures of the Emir' as they protested', to highlight how their struggle was not about insurgency but about the institutionalised lack of socio-political inclusiveness and the systematic socio-economic inequalities.[1107] However, from the regime's perspective, these demands were perceived as dangerous. A Kuwaiti political economist stated: 'In a country of 1.2 million citizens, adding around 100,000 citizens, with all the subsidies and welfare entitlements, could have a toll on the public finance whose status already pushed citizens into the streets, and most importantly alter the delicate balance of the national fabric, and political equilibrium in elected institutions. Jahra, an area

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[1104] "Kuwait says stateless protesters carried out criminal acts", *Reuters*, 2 May 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-protest-idUSBRE84111E20120502; "Kuwait riot police disperse stateless protesters", *Chicago Tribune*, 1 May 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-05-01/news/sns-rt-us-kuwait-protestbre84012v-20120501_1_riot-police-kuwait-city-long-batons, (accessed 28 March 2018).
[1105] Scott Weiner, "The Politics of Kuwait's Bidoon Issue", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 20 October 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/73492, (accessed 28 March 2018); "Kuwait's stateless Bidun 'offered Comoros citizenship'", *BBC News*, 10 November 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29982964, (accessed 28 March 2018)
[1106] Jane Kinninmont, "Citizenship in the Gulf", in Ana Echagüe, (ed.), *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings* (Madrid: FRIDE), 2013, p. 57.
[1107] Simon Atkinson, "Kuwait's stateless Bidun demand greater rights" BBC News, 19 July 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/business-14185365 (accessed 13 February 2019); In an interview with the author on Skype, on 21 January 2019, a young Kuwaiti activist stated that: 'I have been talking to the leaders of the bidoon community: their utmost concern is not the regime's legitimacy but their basic rights. They didn't even join the opposition to because they didn't want to give the government any excuse to be harsher on them.'

populated by both *bidoons* and tribes, is already the largest electoral district in the country.'[1108]

From the parallel protests taking place around the National Assembly instead, what emerged was a constellation of actors, arguably with different interests but a common dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. Royal factionalism played a role, as royals marginalised by Emir Sabah, attempted to instrumentalise dissent against the Prime Minister in their favour.[1109] The youth groups pushed against elites corruption, perceived to be at the root of dissatisfactory economic development, and against abuse of power, as the royal family was perceived to be unfairly manipulating the parliamentary system.[1110] Tribal-Islamist groups, led by Musallam al-Barrak, instead, were also arguably seeking to accrue more power and influence by aligning with the youth.[1111] Since the mid-2000s Kuwait's tribal communities, the single youngest and largest group among Kuwaiti nationals, had been engaged in an escalation with the government, including via their vocal representatives in parliamentary opposition.[1112] The events of 2011 thus aggravated a long-standing, deep fault line – and socio-political vulnerability - within Kuwait's national fabric: that between *Hadhar* (urban people – those whose forefathers lived in Kuwait before the advent of the oil era in 1946) and the *Badu* (tribespeople – immigrants of who were naturalised naturalised between 1965 and 1981).[1113]

In contrast to other scenes from the region, the youth and opposition groups, even while storming the Parliament, sang the national anthem, which praises the ruling family: Kuwait expert Kristin Diwan explained this with 'Kuwaiti activists are not seeking regime overthrow, rather something even more rare: a genuine

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[1108] Interview with a Kuwaiti political economist, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.

[1109] Mohammad Alwuhaib, "Kuwait: The Crisis and its Future". *Arab Reform Brief* #63, November 2012.

[1110] In an interview with the author on 13 December 2018 in Kuwait City, a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University stated: 'The continued dissolutions of parliament exposed the dysfunctionality of the system and eroded public confidence. Every time the National Assembly fails to be effective, people take the streets'.

[1111] In an interview with the author in Kuwait City, on 13 December 2018, a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula stated that the 'protests were dominated by the tribal-Islamist opposition, while the hadar did not participate in great numbers for fear of loosing their status'.

[1112] Alsharekh, "Youth, protest and the new elite."

[1113] Anh Nga Longva. "Nationalism in pre-modern guise: the discourse on hadhar and badu in Kuwait." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38.2 (2006): pp. 171-187.

constitutional monarchy.[1114] All of the interviewees of the author agreed that, for all of its shortcomings, the Kuwaiti political system in a way guaranteed its own resilience and elections served as effective avenues to channel popular grievances.[1115] They also remarked that Kuwait was not new to popular movements, but, as a government official said, 'this movement had two key features: it was remarkably cross-coalitional, and was partly led by the strongest oppositional group in the country, that of tribal Islamists.'[1116] These are the key elements to bear in mind how the 2011 protests represented a most sensitive context, in which vulnerabilities came to the surface for the Kuwaiti regime, and the backdrop against which the regime perceived the other issues object of this research.

8.2 Kuwait and the 'Shi'a threat'.

Similarly to other GCC governments, the Kuwaiti regime's perceptions of the 'Shi'a threat' are connected to the government's relations with the local Shi'a communities, the historical background of interactions with Iran, the individual cognition of the leadership in both countries, and topical events.

Iran was among the first countries to recognize Kuwait after it gained independence in 1961, and Muhammad Reza Shah supported Kuwait as Iraq refused to recognize its sovereignty and demanded its annexation.[1117] At that time, Kuwaiti Shi'a had had their place in the country's politics for decades already: since the establishment of the first elected legislative assembly - or Majlis - in 1938, Kuwaiti Shi'a had seated in the institution and represented a politically engaged community in Kuwait's complex semi-democratic system.[1118] The Shi'a

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[1114] Diwan, "Kuwait's constitutional showdown".
[1115] Interview of the author with a Kuwait diplomat, London, 13 November 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti Shi'a politician, Kuwait City, 12 December 2018; Interview of the author with a young Kuwaiti activist, Skype, 21 January 2019.
[1116] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018
[1117] Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press), 2009, p. 194.
[1118] Rivka Azoulay, "The Politics of Shi'i Merchants in Kuwait," in Steffen Hertog, Giacomo Luciani, and Marc Valeri (eds) *Business Politics in the Middle East*, (London: Hurst, 2013).

community in Kuwait includes prominent merchant families owning large conglomerates – including Al Kazemi International, Marafie Group and Morad Yousuf Behbehani Group – well positioned to claim influence on politics.[1119] Although participating in different political groups - often competing with one another - Kuwaiti Shi'a have, largely speaking, adopted common positions in key instances.[1120] For instance, when the first Majlis was dissolved by Emir Ahmed al-Jabir al-Sabah, in 1938, the Shi'a supported the Emir against other Majlis members, mostly Sunni Arab notables, who demanded the institutionalization of their participation in the decision-making process.[1121] Likewise, when the Al Sabah family had to confront the rising influence of Arab nationalists, rulers again relied on Shi'a elites as a counterweight to the political challenges.[1122] Amid this non-confrontational environment, a significant shift took place with the Islamic revolution in Iran.

The 1979 revolution came as a shock for Kuwaiti rulers: as a small state, Kuwait first tried to navigate the transition from the Shah towards the Islamic regime without attracting excessive hostility from Tehran.[1123] However, in the aftermath of the revolution, a wave of unrest swept Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Shi'a provinces as Tehran backed transnational Shi'a activism, attempting to export the revolutionary upheaval across the region.[1124] The Kuwaiti Shi'a communities split: on one hand merchants, who remained pro-*status quo* in their political activities, on the other hand radical groups, such as the followers of Iraqi Shi'a cleric Mohammed Mahdi al-Shirazi, the Shiraziyyun, who perpetrated political violence in the country.[1125] The authorities reacted harshly, including through imprisonment and citizenship revocation.[1126] The entire al-Muhri family, whose head Abbas al-Muhri had emerged as a community leader for restive Shi'a and had been appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini as his representative in Kuwait,

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[1119] Ibid.

[1120] The various groups are enumerated in: 'Ahmed Assiri, *al-Nizam al-Siyasi fi al-Kuwait: Mabadi wa Mumarasat* [The Political System of Kuwait: Principals and Actions] (Kuwait) 2012, pp. 164–167.

[1121] Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*, p. 61.

[1122] Ibid.

[1123] Hamad Albloshi, " Iran and Kuwait." in Anourashivan Ehteshami, Neil Quilliam and Gawdat Bahgat (eds) *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2017, p. 134

[1124] Louër. *Transnational Shia politics*.

[1125] Ibid.

[1126] Ibid.

was deported to Iran.[1127] Relations between the authorities and the Shi'a worsened even more with the Iran–Iraq war between 1980 and 1988. The Kuwaiti government was fearful still of a revolutionary contagion, as well as of the implications of an Iranian territorial occupation of Iraq.[1128] Kuwait was hence a major supporter of the Iraqi regime, providing about $15 billion in financial assistance and aid, and selling US missiles to Baghdad.[1129] Iran reacted by symmetrical and asymmetrical means. Tehran allegedly supported transnational Shi'a groups, such as Islamic Jihad, to carry on attacks in Kuwait, including against the US and French embassies, and a tremendously significant attempt on the life of the then Emir, Jabir al-Ahmad, in 1985.[1130] In the late 1980s, Iranian missiles were launched at Kuwaiti targets, including an oil port, and dozens of Kuwaiti oil tankers were attacked, pushing Kuwait to expel Iranian diplomats and negotiate with international powers the re-flagging of its oil tankers.[1131] When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the calculus changed again. This was both because Iran stood with Kuwait against its Iraqi foes, and because Kuwaiti Shi'a actively participated to rebuke Iraqi forces, calling for the return of the ruling family from exile after the liberation of Kuwait.[1132] The 1990 invasion had the effect of unifying Kuwaitis, including the Shi'a communities, behind the al-Sabah and against an external threat.[1133]

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, relations between Kuwait and Iran under the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami, entered a constructive phase, punctuated by an exchange of bilateral visits and agreements, including the 2003 security cooperation treaty on smuggling and piracy.[1134] In 2007 the two countries

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[1127] Falah al-Mdaires, *Al-Ḥaraka al-Shiʿiyya fī al-Kuwait* (Kuwait: Dar Qurtas), 1999, pp. 24–7.

[1128] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti historian, Skype, 20 January 2019.

[1129] Albloshi, " Iran and Kuwait.", p. 135

[1130] Ibid.

[1131] Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing), 2002, pp. 9 – 12.

[1132] Azoulay and Beaugrand. "Limits of political clientelism: elites in Kuwait fragmenting politics"

[1133] This point was raised by many interviewees including a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University interviewed in Kuwait City, on 13 December 2018; a Kuwaiti Shi'a politician interviewed in Kuwait City, 12 December 2018; a Kuwait diplomat interviewed in London, 13 November 2018.

[1134] Khaled Abdulaziz Alsalloum and Mohamed Salman Tayie. "The Present and Future of Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations and Their Influence on the Security of the Arabian Gulf." *Asian Social Science* 14.1 (2017): p. 122.

established a committee to coordinate cooperation in the political, economic, social, security, cultural and scientific arenas.[1135] The security landscape at the domestic level in Kuwait was stable, although the political scene remained heated. In the early 2000s one of the alleged masterminds of the earlier string of terrorist attacks in Kuwait, known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, reappeared as leader of Kata'eb Hezbollah, the main proxy of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s elite Qods Force, formed in 2004 to be the Hezbollah of post-Saddam Iraq and the Gulf.[1136] Another group, al-Tahaluf al-Islami al-Watani (the Islamic National Alliance), openly identifying as followers of Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei, emerged to become the most influential Shi'a group in the local political arena.[1137] The Islamic National Alliance MPs cooperated with other parliamentarians in establishing a oppositional block called Kutlat al-'Amal al-Shabi (Popular Block) and actively participated in the 2006 Orange Movement, which forced the government to reform the electoral system.[1138]

Between 2006 and 2008, however, the alignment of Shi'a political groups changed again. In 2006, the Emir appointed Sheikh Nasser Mohammed as the country's Prime Minister. A former Ambassador to Iran, Sheikh Nasser had long been close to the Shi'a communities as well as key players in Iran.[1139] This encouraged him to build a coalition with Shi'a political groups, turning them into a pro‑government voting group, to offset Sunni and tribal political groups who, since the 2008 general elections, had increasingly become oppositional both against the government and the Shi'a communities.[1140] This alliance with the regime was convenient for the Shi'a community, seeking protection from the wave of sectarian hostility sweeping the country after a group of Shi'a MPs had participated to the commemoration of Hezbollah commander 'Imad Mughniyya, 'a controversial figure largely thought to be the mastermind behind the hijacking of two Kuwait Airways flights in the 1980s.' [1141] Indeed, when the two reformist movements Irhal and Karamat Watan organized protests, most of the Shi'a did not participate and some even advocated for the authorities to crack down on

[1135] Ibid.
[1136] Wehrey, *Sectarian politics in the Gulf*.
[1137] Ibid.
[1138] Hamad Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: the Case of the Kuwaiti Shiʿa." *The Muslim World* 106.1 (2016), p. 115
[1139] Azoulay and Beaugrand. "Limits of political clientelism".
[1140] Ibid.
[1141] Ibid.

them.[1142] Similarly, while individual Kuwaiti Shi'a, especially young citizens, participated in demonstrations of dissent in 2011, the Shi'a MPs have sided with the al-Sabah ruling family, even supporting the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser in the various grillings he faced between 2008 and 2011.[1143] Kuwaiti Shi'a stood by the government and the ruling family at a vulnerable time, at the cost of attracting sectarian hostility by other segments of the society.[1144] This loyalty, in turn, helped inform the perceptions of the leadership on the lack of a Shi'a threat from within the country and, therefore, arguably, the leadership's approach to Iran in contemporary times.[1145]

Following the election of moderate Hassan Rouhani as Iranian President in June 2013 and the subsequent signing of the interim nuclear deal, Kuwait tried very early-on to revamp its commercial – and political – relations with Iran. Kuwait's Emir Sabah al-Sabah, went on an official visit to Tehran in June 2014, even before the JCPOA was signed, meeting with the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the President. The official news agency of Kuwait published a joint statement at the end of the visit defining the positive outcomes of the meeting as 'an important turning point in the relations between the two countries'.[1146] It was the Emir's first official visit to Iran since assuming power in January 2006, and the first by any Kuwaiti Emir since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Kuwait noticeably did not join Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in cutting off diplomatic relations with Iran after tensions surged following to the assaults to the Saudi diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad that took place amid the Saudi execution of the Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016.[1147] In early 2017 Kuwait's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Sabah al-Khaled al-Sabah, visited Teheran and carried with him a letter from Emir Sabah to President Rouhani that sought

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[1142] Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", p. 120
[1143] Ibid.
[1144] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti Shi'a politician, Kuwait City, 12 December 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism in Kuwait, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.
[1145] Interview of the author with a Kuwait diplomat, London, 13 November 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwait researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018; Interview of the author with an expert of Kuwaiti politics, London, 17 January 2019.
[1146] "Kuwait, Iran vow joint work to develop ties", Press Release, *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, 2 June 2014, http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticlePrintPage.aspx?id=2380502&language=en, (accessed 7 March 2018).
[1147] Albloshi, " Iran and Kuwait.", p. 138

to establish the 'basis for dialogue' between the GCC and Iran. According to a Kuwaiti diplomat, it is to that end that Kuwait exerted efforts to negotiate between the warring parties on Yemen: 'While we are part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, our role has been non-combat, but focused on humanitarian aid and trying to leverage our good relations with all parties to spur negotiations.'[1148] At the time of his visit, Sheikh Sabah commented, 'There is a genuine willingness and desire to have normal and fair relations with Iran.'[1149] While the economic ties between the countries are not strong - according to the Iranian Ambassador to Kuwait bilateral trade stood at $400 million in 2015 - the two countries have common strategic interests in the energy sector, with Kuwait eager to import gas and fresh water from Iran.[1150]

However, a string of events between 2015 and 2017 shook this attempted rapprochement. In August 2015 Kuwait's security forces discovered a large cache of weapons hidden on a farm in Abdali, at the Kuwait-Iraq borders.[1151] Twenty-six people, all Kuwaiti Shi'a except for one Iranian, were arrested on charges of 'spying for the Islamic republic of Iran and Hezbollah to carry out aggressive acts against the State of Kuwait'.[1152] Some of these were close to the Islamic National Alliance, whose MPs boycotted a parliamentary session in protest of the verdict.[1153] A similar episode had taken place in 2010, when the Kuwaiti Court of First Instance sentenced three individuals for being part of a cell working for Iran, an accusation reiterated by Muhammad al-Sabah, the former Foreign Minister.[1154] After a long process, in the summer of 2017, Kuwait's

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[1148] Interview of the author with a Kuwait diplomat, London, 13 November 2018.
[1149] Quoted in "Emir Sabah makes landmark visit to Iran", *Gulf States News*, issue 971, 05 June 2014.
[1150] The Iranian Ambassador's remarks are quoted in: Albloshi, " Iran and Kuwait.", p. 138. According to Hussein Amery, in 'Water security for Kuwait: assessing the feasibility of water imports from Iran', published in the *Int. J. Hydrology Science and Technology*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 292–305,the desalination process for Kuwait is 20 percent more costly than importing fresh water from Iran would be and Iran stands to gain at least $75 million annually. "Kuwait seeks gas from Iran", *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 4 June 2014.
[1151] Sylvia Westall, "Terror case opens up Kuwait's sectarian divisions", *Reuters*, 2 June 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-security-iran-insight/terror-case-opens-up-kuwaits-sectarian-divisions-idUSKCN0YO0VH, (accessed 7 March 2018)
[1152] "Kuwait charges 24 'linked to Iran' with plotting attacks", *Khaleej Times*, 1 September 2015, chttps://www.khaleejtimes.com/region/mena/kuwait-charges-24-linked-to-iran-with-plotting-attacks (accessed 22 July 2017)
[1153] Hamid Dashti, Kuwaiti Shi'a MP, quoted in Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring", p. 123.
[1154] Ibid.

Supreme Court confirmed the involvement of Iran's IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah.[1155] The Kuwaiti government expelled fifteen Iranian diplomats and submitted a formal letter of protest to the Lebanese government accusing Hezbollah of 'intelligence, coordination of meetings, payment of funds and provision of weapons and training on Lebanese territory... with the aim of destroying the basic infrastructure of the state of Kuwait.'[1156]

Questioned on the impact of the Abdali affair on government-Shi'a relations a Kuwaiti government official interviewed by the author stated: 'The Abdali affair has proven the existence of active cells of violent opposition from within the Shi'a communities, and has recalled in the leadership memories of the 1980s. However, these sporadic episodes cannot eclipse the fact that Kuwaiti Shi'a have most often been nationalistic and loyal to the ruling family.'[1157] Overall, keeping in mind the history of positive interaction between Shi'a MPs and the Kuwaiti leadership, the sporadic nature of violent opposition from the fringes of the Kuwaiti Shi'a community, and the sustained attempt of engagement by the Kuwaiti leadership with the Iranian government, it seems fair to asses that Iran has not been perceived after 2011 as a full-fledged threat by the Kuwaiti regime, against its identity and stability or the functional integrity of its borders and institutions. A Shi'a politician interviewed in Kuwait stated: 'Iranian-backed Shi'a groups are a minority in the community and there is no indication that they are perceived as having the intent or the capacity to threaten the regime's political stability. Certainly they don't have the support of the political leaders of the Shi'a communities, the MPs'.[1158] The fact that Shi'a communities in Kuwait have traditionally played a significant role in the country's politics, testifies a lack of institutionalised marginalisation. A Kuwaiti political analyst interviewed by the author in 2018 remarked that: 'While there is some sectarianism at the social level, there is very little at a government level and Shi'a Kuwaitis have held very

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[1155] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Walking the Tightrope: Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations in the Aftermath of the Abdali Affair." *IndraStra Global* 8 (2017).
[1156] Quoted in "Kuwait hands Lebanon letter of protest over Hezbiollah practises" *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, 22 July 2017, https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2625663&language=en, (accessed 7 March 2018)
[1157] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.
[1158] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti Shi'a politician, Kuwait City, 12 December 2018

high-level positions in the country. For instance, Ali al-Mu'min went from being the military's Chief of Staff to being nominated the Kuwaiti Ambassador to Iraq. Both are very high-profile, and sensitive positions. Mohammed Abul-Hassan, the former Minister of Information, is known to be one of the closest advisors to the Emir.'[1159] The lack of any significant marginalisation can also be read as the lack of a significant socio-political vulnerability, identified in this thesis as a key leverage for external threats to morph into intermestic ones, such as, potentially, an asymmetrical threat originated or fuelled by Iran. However, the issues of clandestine cells, such as the Abdali cell, as well as past instances of sympathies for insurgency cannot be eclipsed as well. The politicization of the Shi'a population has been long-standing and the communities represent a consistent minority. In addition, in the views of a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarian violence, 'the ruling family regards the activities of more extremist Shi'a groups as dangerous of inflaming sectarianism in the country, when in fact harmonious sectarian relations are considered the lynchpin of the country's stability.'[1160] Overall, as seen from this thesis' framework, Iran and the 'Shi'a threat' have been perceibved by the Kuwaiti leadership in the period 2011-2017 as an acute intermestic risk.

8.3 Kuwait and the 'Islamist threat'.

In Kuwait, branches of the Muslim Brotherhood have existed since when individual members of the Egyptian organization escaped from the prosecution of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser.[1161] Like elsewhere, the Brotherhood first established a social arm, Islah, (or the Social Reform Association), in 1951. The Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed political support and even financial assistance by the government in the period between the 1960s and the 1980s, since it was seen as a bulwark against Arab nationalism, that was considered more politically threatening.[1162] A political branch, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM or

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[1159] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018
[1160] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism in Kuwait, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018. A similar position was also expressed by a professor of political science at Kuwait University, interviewed in Kuwait City, on 11 December 2018, and a Kuwaiti historian interviewed via Skype on 20 January 2019.
[1161] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*, pp. 15-16.
[1162] Ibid.

Hadas, as it is known in Arabic), was created in 1991. In the aftermath of the 1990 Iraqi invasion, the Kuwait Brotherhood underwent a period of significant change, formally breaking organizational ties with the international Muslim Brotherhood over Islamist support for Saddam Hussein.[1163] According to a Kuwaiti diplomat interviewed by the author, the initiative of cutting ties with the international Brotherhood has had a significant impact on the way in which the movement is perceived by the Kuwaiti leadership: the movement wanted to show respect to the Sabah rulers' legitimacy and avoid being perceived as more loyal to the transnational Brotherhood than to the Emir.[1164] At the same time, the organization became more focused on reformist positions and, since the 1992 elections, it formed electoral coalitions with members of the opposition in the National Assembly.[1165]

Kuwait has thus integrated the indigenous Muslim Brotherhood in its parliamentary politics since the 1990s, treating it as any other opposition group and countering its reformist stances through political means. In the Assembly, Hadas MPs focused initially on issues such as a campaign to proclaim shari'a the main source of legislation, the attempt to overturn Kuwait University's decision to ban the wearing of the niqab in laboratories and to introduce gender segregation in schools – a measure which passed in 1996 after having been voted down in 1994.[1166] A Kuwaiti historian interviewed in 2019 remarked: 'Despite governments harbouring concern towards some of these measures, the Brotherhood historically was not antagonistic vis-à-vis the ruling family, and many of its members were granted positions in institutions. For instance in 1976 Islah did not protest the dissolution of the Assembly and its chairman Abd al-Aziz al-Mutawwa was appointed Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs'.[1167]

The 2000s marked a significant change in government-Hadas relations. In 2006 Hadas supported for the first time the more vocal, extra-parliamentary opposition, namely the Orange Movement.[1168] When the movement managed to obtain new elections, Hadas won six seats as part of the 35-member opposition bloc, and

[1163] Freer, *Rentier Islamism,* p. 109.
[1164] Interview with Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018.
[1165] Freer, *Rentier Islamism*, p. 85
[1166] Ibid.
[1167] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti historian, Skype, 20 January 2019
[1168] Alblooshi and Alfahad. "The Orange Movement of Kuwait".

the five-district law was passed by a majority opposition parliament.[1169] Around that time, Islamist groups - both Hadas but also Salafi activist organizations such as Hizb al-Ummah – started to acknowledge a convergence of interests with tribal communities.[1170] Residing on the outer districts of Kuwait, tribes such as the al-Rashaida, al-Awaem and al-Ajman, were, since the 1960s, looked at, by the ruling family, as a counterweight to the more politically sophisticated and demanding urban population, in exchange for economic benefits and incentives.[1171] However, over time, tribes developed a wider political awareness and increasingly saw Islamist movements, very active in their outer districts through social programmes, as palatable allies.[1172] A new generation of tribal youth found in these movements a vehicle for upward mobility into politics, while the support of tribes guaranteed to Islamist movements a considerable pool of votes.[1173] Between 2006 and 2008, young candidates from the tribes, such as Jamaan al-Harbash, Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri or Faysal al-Muslim al-Utaibi were elected to the Assembly, all as affiliates of Islamist formations.[1174] As a reaction to the increasingly vocal nature of tribal-Islamist opposition, the government banned the practice of tribal primaries, which were an effective system to rally tribal votes on fewer candidates in national elections, triggering violent clashes between tribesmen and security forces, and anti-tribal sentiment and discourse.[1175] However, in the new elections called in 2008, again the tribal-Islamist coalition gained seats.[1176] In that period, the leadership of Musallam al-Barrak, who in the 2006 elections won a record number of votes, started to emerge.[1177] A member of the large and influential al-Mutayr tribe, al-Barrak was continuously re-elected from 1999 to 2012.[1178] During this time he was affiliated with the former Popular Action Bloc and has been active on different fronts as an opposition politician, including the Orange Movement. In the post-2008 politically-

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[1169] Ibid.

[1170] Fatiha Dazi-Heni. "The Arab Spring Impact on Kuwaiti 'Exceptionalism.'" *Arabian Humanities*, 4, 2015.

[1171] Ibid.

[1172] Ibid.

[1173] Ibid.

[1174] Freer, *Rentier Islamism,* p. 141

[1175] Dazi-Heni. "The Arab Spring Impact on Kuwaiti 'Exceptionalism.'"

[1176] Brown, "Kuwait's 2008 Parliamentary Elections: A Setback for Democratic Islamism?."

[1177] Shafeeq Ghabra, "Kuwait at the crossroads of Change or Political Stagnation", Policy Papers Series, *Middle East Institute*, N° 2, May 2014.

[1178] Ibid.

charged context, 'he slowly became the most vocal politician against the corruption and abuse of power of the regime', as movements such as Irhal, since 2009, were coalescing forces around tribal-Islamist groups and against the Prime Minister.[1179]

In fact, in 2011, tribal-Islamist opposition members in the Assembly embarked early-on the protesters' concerns and, in June, questioned the Prime Minister on issues ranging from alleged misuse of public funds to harming national security and relations with Arab countries by favouring ties with Iran.[1180] Some of the most prominent Hadas MPs, such as Obaid al-Wasmi, emerged among the protests' leaders, and strongly advocated for a constitutional reform 'that must lead to forming an elected government and a full parliamentary system.'[1181] As mentioned, when the Constitutional Court reinstated a pro-regime 2009 National Assembly and the rumour spread that the Emir wanted to revise the electoral laws to a one-person-one-vote system, Musallam al-Barrak gave his fiery speech, challenging the Emir itself, and being sentenced to prison.[1182] Hadas and other opposition blocs subsequently boycotted the following two parliamentary elections – in 2012 and 2013 – and even conducted, and lost, a legal fight to undo the decree.[1183] However, following the Court's ruling legitimising the one-person-one-vote new electoral law Hadas was one of the first groups within the opposition to decide to break the boycott.[1184] One former Hadas MP stated that the movement's representatives met directly with the Emir and 'tried to be conciliatory to secure the general pardon' of their members imprisoned during the Arab Spring.[1185] In early 2013, Hadas subscribed to a document drafted by Musallam al-Barrak, former Hadas MP Jamaan al-Harbash and and Tariq al-Mutairi of the liberal Civil Democratic Movement, advocating for expanded parliamentary authority, an independent judiciary, and a modified criminal

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[1179] Interview of the author with a young Kuwaiti activist, Skype, 21 January 2019
[1180] Azoulay and Beaugrand. "Limits of political clientelism".
[1181] Quoted in "Kuwait protest at court ruling dissolving parliament", *BBC News*, 27 June 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18606540, (accessed 7 March 2018)
[1182] Albloshi and Herb. "Karamet Watan", p. 411.
[1183] Ibid.
[1184] Courtney Freer, "Political Islam in Post-Arab Spring Kuwait: The Rise of Political Coalitions in an Age of Pragmatism" in Mohammad Affan (ed.), *Transformation of Political Islam in a Changing Regional Order*, Sharq Form, 2019, p.123.
[1185] Quoted in Freer, "Political Islam in Post-Arab Spring Kuwait", p. 126.

code.[1186] This signalled that Hadas' opposition continued to play by the rulebook of Kuwait's political system: by being embedded into the institutional mechanism, 'the movement wanted to avoid being labelled subversive'.[1187]

Another contentious moment in the regime-Hadas relations came in the summer of 2013, when Kuwait's government backed the Egyptian military ousting the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi from the Presidency. Hadas members, including via the group's official website and social media channels, were very vocal in their condemnation of Egypt's military and criticising the Sabah rulers for their anti-Morsi line.[1188] Such reaction prompted opponents of the party to accuse Hadas of being subservient to the Brotherhood in Egypt, and scheming against the Kuwaiti government through infiltration in government institutions to undermine the state from within.[1189] This was the traditional accusation levelled against the Brotherhood in the GCC and most commonly in the United Arab Emirates, the most hostile government to political Islam. Indeed the UAE even linked some prominent Kuwaitis to the individuals arrested in Abu Dhabi on charge of being Brotherhood members.[1190] However, the Kuwaiti government, while arresting and deporting Egyptians accused of being Brotherhood members, did not take offensive actions against Kuwaiti members of the group.[1191] On the other hand when, in January 2015, former Hadas MP Mubarak al-Duwailah went on TV accusing Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Shaykh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan of being 'against Sunni Islam', he was arrested on charges of endangering ties with an ally and insulting leaders of an allied state and sentenced to two years in prison by Kuwait's Court of Appeals.[1192]

At the height of the confrontation between the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood and the regime, in the end of 2013, Scott Williamson and Nathan Brown wrote in *Foreign Policy* that: 'There is no sign that the government is treating Hadas as a

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[1186] E.A.D., "Kuwait's Opposition: A Reawakening," *The Economist*, 17 April 2014.

[1187] Interview of the author with an expert of Kuwaiti politics, London, 17 January 2019

[1188] Scott Williamson and Nathan J. Brown, "Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood under pressure", *Foreign Policy*, 20 November 2013, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/20/kuwaits-muslim-brotherhood-under-pressure/

[1189] الشاهد, "أكاديميون ونواب: الخليج دول على للانقلاب الإخوان بوابة الكويت" 22 August 2013, http://www.alshahedkw.com/

[1190] Interview of the author with Emirati diplomat, London, 3 October 2018.

[1191] Williamson and Brown, "Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood under pressure".

[1192] Habib Toumi, 'Kuwait Former MP Sentenced for Insulting UAE', *Gulf News*, 13 April 2016, http://gulf news.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-former-mp-sentenced-for-insulting-uae-1.1710578. (accessed 19 February 2019).

security threat: just the opposite, in fact, as the movement continues to operate openly and vociferously and its leaders evince confidence that it will continue to be regarded more as a political nuisance than a security threat.'[1193] In fact, when Hadas participated to a new march protesting the corruption of key figures of the regime, such as Nasser Mohammed al-Sabah, there was no existential retaliation from the government against Hadas, even as five members of other opposition groups saw their citizenship revoked.[1194] Hadas continued to organize and take part in smaller protests thorough 2015 against judicial corruption, the government's policy of stripping citizenship, the detention of political prisoners.[1195] The group's members were still allowed to compete in the 2016 general elections in Kuwait, when they fared relatively well.[1196]

Year	Hadas' seats in the National Assembly (out of 50)
1992	5
1996	5
1999	4
2003	2
2006	6
2008	3
2009	1
February 2012	4
December 2012	0 (boycott)
July 2013	0 (boycott)
2016	4

Table 8.3: Hadas' representation in the National Assembly (1992 - 2016)

[1193] Ibid.

[1194] 'Kuwait: 5 Critics Stripped of Citizenship', *Human Rights Watch*, 10 August 2014, http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/10/kuwait-5-critics-stripped-citizenship. (accessed 19 February 2019).

[1195] Linah Alsaafin, 'Kuwait Security Forces Violently Disperse Anti-Government Protest', *Middle East Eye*, 23 March 2015. http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kuwaiti-security-forces-violently-dis perse-anti-government-protest-1878869579. (accessed 19 February 2019).

[1196] "Kuwait poll: Opposition wins nearly half of parliament", *Al Jazeera*, 27 November 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/kuwait-poll-opposition-wins-parliament -161127060822207.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)

Hadas' re-entry into the country's parliamentary life is illustrative of the peculiar history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, where the political and institutional reality constrain the perimeter of the group's political activity. This background and the institutional framework have been identified by most interviewees as factors strongly influencing the Kuwaiti regime's perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood in the period between 2011 and 2017.[1197] 'Although Hadas has become undeniably more vocal in the 2010s, the regime has long developed a system to handle their political activism through a careful mix of co-optation and coercion and, therefore, doesn't see them as political threat. This explains why Kuwaiti repeatedly refused to join Abu Dhabi in terms of designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, as the Brotherhood itself is certainly laying low after the Qatar crisis of 2017 and the rise in regional anti-Islamist campaigns. At the same time, they cannot risk that the local Muslim Brotherhood threatens relations with Saudi Arabia, or the UAE', remarked a Kuwaiti diplomat interviewed in 2018.[1198] The refusal to provoke hostility in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi might have driven the harsh measures taken against al-Duwailah. And yet, there is another element to consider that would induce to describe the wider Islamist political spectrum as a risk in the contemporary perceptions of the Kuwaiti regime: the growing trend to form ever-broader, cross-ideological opposition coalitions. A long-time expert on Kuwaiti politics put it as follows: 'The most important challenge for the Kuwaiti regime has long been the groups advocating for a devolution of power from the royal family towards elected institutions. However, the government can manage individual political forces in parliament, including through corruption, or divide-and-rule tactics. But a broad coalition including extra-parliamentary forces and tribes, would be a challenge of a whole different level.'[1199] In consideration of the aforementioned factors, it is possible to state that the Kuwaiti regime in the period 2011-2017, perceived the Muslim Brotherhood as a risk, rather than a threat.

[1197] This point was reiterated by several interviewees, including: Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University interviewed in Kuwait City, on 13 December 2018; an expert of Kuwaiti politics, interviewed in London, 17 January 2019; a Kuwait diplomat interviewed in London, 13 November 2018; a Saudi-Kuwaiti journalist interviewed in Kuwait City on 11 December 2018.

[1198] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018.

[1199] Interview of the author with an expert of Kuwaiti politics, London, 17 January 2019.

8.4 Kuwait and the 'jihadi threat'.

Thorough its modern history, and especially since the surge of al-Qa'ida to international prominence after 9/11, Kuwait has witnessed attacks by Sunni jihadi groups. In fact, between 2001 and 2005 a dozen terrorist incidents have been recorded in the country.[1200] In that period, two main groups were active: the Lions of the Peninsula Brigades and the Mujahideen of Kuwait. Their activities were focused on two issues: using Kuwait as a platform to facilitate jihad in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as well as in Iraq, and attacking US forces stationed in Kuwait or deployed In Iraq since 2003. A network of Kuwaiti smugglers used the country as a transit point for operatives traveling to partake in jihad, while offering financial support.[1201] A contingent of Kuwaitis also fought alongside al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) against the US-led coalition in Iraq and, by November 2005, there were 12 Kuwaitis in Guantanamo.[1202] Both the Lions of the Peninsula Brigades, linked to the Saudi-based al-Haramain Brigades, a subgroup of AQAP and the Mujahideen of Kuwait, carried out attacks against Kuwaiti security forces and US personnel, and plotted suicide attacks in the country. Kuwaiti authorities admitted that a handful personnel among the armed forces of the country had joined jihadist groups: in 2002 and 2003 attacks were perpetrated by civil servants, in 2005 four men from the Kuwait Army were arrested for planning an attack against foreign personnel.[1203] The largest arrest campaign took place in March 2005, when 25 Kuwaitis and seven *bidoons* were tried for belonging to the Lions of the Peninsula Brigades, and even of plotting a coup against the Kuwaiti government.[1204] Overall, the reaction of the authorities to this phase was a mix of hard security counterterrorism tools, and attacking the ideological base of violent extremism, extending warnings to both clerics and charities, accused of

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[1200] Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid R. Al-Rodhan. *Gulf military forces in an era of asymmetric wars*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006, pp. 108 -110.
[1201] Ibid.
[1202] "Last Kuwaiti held in Guantanamo released", *Al Jazeera America*, 8 January 2016, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2016/1/8/last-kuwaiti-held-in-guantanamo-released.html (accessed 12 February 2019)
[1203] Cordesman and Al-Rodhan. *Gulf military forces in an era of asymmetric wars*, p. 109.
[1204] "Qaida fugitive surrenders in Kuwait", *Al Jazeera*, 9 March 2006, https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/03/200849132354219100.html (accessed 12 February 2019)

indoctrination and illicit financing respectively.[1205] The approach succeeded in eclipsing the two groups and, for a number of years, jihadism in Kuwait.

When, between 2014 and 2015, a new jihadi group, Daesh, surged to global and regional prominence in neighbouring Iraq and Syria, Kuwait was again at the receiving end of violent extremist. In June 2015, a Daesh cell perpetrated an attack in the historic Shi'ite Imam Sadiq mosque in Kuwait City. [1206] The attack killed 27 people and wounded 227, becoming one of the bloodiest in the country's history. According to a researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula: 'It became clear that the problem with Sunni extremism persisted and proper control and monitoring were lacking.'[1207] Seven Kuwaitis, five Saudis, three Pakistanis, and thirteen *bidoons* were charged for the attack.[1208] The attack's ringleader was identified as Abdulrahman Sabah Saud, a *bidoon* man who drove the Saudi suicide bomber to the mosque. The cell that carried on the attack was declaredly part of the Daesh-affiliated group calling itself Najd Province. In spite of the sustained campaign of arrests, in July 2016, the Interior Ministry announced that security forces had thwarted 'three pre-emptive operations in Kuwait and abroad that led to derailing a number of [Daesh] plots targeting Kuwait' including a new plot against another Shi'a mosque.[1209]

Kuwait, like other regional governments had previously been identified as a target in the Deash discourse, branding the Kuwaiti leadership as hostile.[1210] Firstly, Kuwait is in the international anti-Daesh coalition fighting the group in Syria, and hence allied with enemy Western governments.[1211] Secondly, Kuwait hosts a large Shi'a minority mostly aligned with the government, considered by Daesh

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[1205] Michael Knights, "Backing Kuwait's Stand against Terrorism", Policy Watch #955, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 February 2005.

[1206] "Daesh claims responsibility for mosque explosion in Kuwait", *Gulf News*, 27 June 2015, https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/daesh-claims-responsibility-for-mosque-explosion-in-kuwait-1.154108 (accessed 7 March 2018)

[1207] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018

[1208] "Kuwait mosque attack suspect admits being in Daesh",*Gulf News*, 4 August 2015, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-mosque-attack-suspect-admits-being-in-daesh-1.1561408 (accessed 7 March 2018)

[1209] "Kuwait Says It Thwarted 3 Planned ISIS Attacks", *Reuters*, 3 July 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/world/middleeast/kuwait-isis-shiite-muslims (accessed 12 February 2019)

[1210] Ragab. "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS".

[1211] Ibid., p. 590

infidels and enemies.[1212] However, these are features common to other GCC governments and yet Kuwait was the only GCC country, other than Saudi Arabia, where Daesh was able to finalize an operation. In the words of a government official interviewed in 2018: 'Those are also two countries bordering Iraq via the desert: a factor of geographic proximity that represents a strategic opportunity for jihadists'.[1213] Kuwait is also the third GCC country for number of recruits: estimates say that approximately 70 Kuwaitis have joined Daesh in Syria or Iraq, as opposed to around 2500 Saudi and over 100 Bahraini.[1214] However, other estimates, such as those by the Syrian Committee for Human Rights, put the number of Kuwaiti fighters in February 2015 at approximately 400.[1215] In a separate report, local media stated that around 150 of them were *bidoons*.[1216] There aren't estimates about the number of fighters that, instead, decided to fight directly in Kuwait. There is, however, an indication about online sympathisers: according to a study published by the Brookings Institute in January 2015, tracing the geographic locations of Daesh supporters on social media, of the 20,000 accounts analysed, over 300 claimed to be in Kuwait.[1217] While in July, a member of the National Assembly presented a bill to criminalize 'any acts of support or affiliation with terrorist organizations,' with an emphasis on Daesh, the Assembly did not pass the bill.[1218]

The involvement of a individuals from the *bidoon* community in Kuwait-based jihadi groups, both in the 2000s and 2010s, cannot be ignored. As a marginalized, disenfranchised community the *bidoons* hold serious socio-political and socio-economic grievances that make them susceptible to the rising influence of Salafi and tribal-Islamist currents, often well-rooted in the periphery were the *bidoons*

[1212] Ibid., p. 588

[1213] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018.

[1214] Benmelech and Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?".

[1215] Quoted in Ragab. "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS", p. 591.

[1216] "كويتياً و«بدون» عرضة لصفقات بين التنظيمات المسلحة في سوريا 150", *Al Qabas*, 25 August 2016, https://alqabas.com/202693/, (accessed 7 March 2018)

[1217] J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan. "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter." Analysis Papers, 20, *Brookings Institute*, March 2015.

[1218] "Country Report on Terrorism 2017", United States Department of State Publication, Bureau of Counterterrorism, July 2018.

reside and engaged in distributing financial support.[1219] This proximity to centers of Sunni radicalization, together with pre-esisting grievances, might have pushed them towards jihadi groups. Indeed a member of Daesh, interviewed for a psychological study in 2016 declared: 'if you mean that they were frustrated due to an unjust life than yes, it is a main driver to join Daesh…people who are very frustrated about the life they are living, like the *bidoons* in Kuwait, they believe that the Islamic State will give them their rights…there were some *hadhar* but the majority around 90 percent were *bidoons.*'[1220] These data have been employed by the Kuwaiti government to single out the community and reinforce its long-standing rhetoric to portray the *bidoons* as a danger to security.[1221] This is part of the rationale used to argue against the inclusion of the community in the Kuwaiti national fabric via citizenship, even in the face of sustained protests in 2011, in turn perpetuating the cycle of disenfranchisement.

In addition, Daesh and other jihadi groups have received from within Kuwait significant financial resources. Indeed, over the past few years, Kuwait has emerged as a financing and organizational hub for charities and individuals supporting extremist and rebel groups in Syria and Iraq.[1222] A number of sources, including US governmental agencies and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), have listed prominent Kuwaitis as financiers of terrorism and included it in the list of monitored countries.[1223] Particularly problematic is how many fundraising campaigns have been organized by politicians or prominent clerics, under the cover of humanitarian aid, to channel funds to armed organizations. In fact also the three blacklists issued by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain during the Qatar crisis, included several Kuwaitis accused of funding

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[1219] Claire Beaugrand, "Biduns in the Face of Radicalization in Kuwait", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington,* 18 August 2015.

[1220] Quote by Participant #4, a member of ISIS, in "Why people join terrorist groups in Kuwait" by Nicholas Scull, Othman Alkhader, Salman Alwadi, presentation for the American Psychology Association Annual Convention, 3 – 6 August 2017, Washington D.C.

[1221] Beaugrand, "Biduns in the Face of Radicalization in Kuwait"

[1222] Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," *Saban Analysis Paper*, December 2013.

[1223] David S. Cohen, "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen at The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'Attacking ISIS's Financial Foundation,'" US Department of the Treasury, 23 October 2014, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2672.aspx. (accessed 12 May 2019)

jihadist organisations.[1224] One of the prominent Kuwaiti names was that of Hamid Hamad al-Ali, who allegedly travelled to Syria to mediate a reconciliation between the leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani and Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[1225] Another name is that of Hajjaj bin Fahad Hajjaj Mohammed al-Ajmi, a Kuwaiti-born Salafi cleric who admittedly channelled funds to Jabhat al-Nusra, coming from a prominent Kuwaiti tribe that included Kuwait's former Minister of Islamic Affairs.[1226] While the same Ministry releases sample sermons to be used by the country's imams, it doesn't force them to follow the instructions, and a number of clerics have employed sectarian-charged discourse, sympathetic to Sunni extremism, in mosques. In August 2013, the Kuwaiti government canceled the television show of religious scholar Shafi al-Ajmi and banned him from giving sermons after he voiced support for jihadist fighters in Syria. Both al-Ajmi clerics were designated as terrorist supporters by the US and briefly detained, before being released without charge.[1227] In addition, while the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor has intensified charity supervision, for instance imposing approval for all fundraising campaigns intended for foreign beneficiaries, the 2017 Country Report on Terrorism stated that 'a number of UN-designated terrorist financiers continued to operate in Kuwait'.[1228]

Given all these elements, the perceptions of jihadist groups between 2011 and 2017 from the perspective of the Kuwaiti government may seem contradictory. On one hand, there is a very clear indication in the official rhetoric that jihadi groups are a major threat. In fact, when asked in 2016 about which should be considered the biggest threat to Kuwait, H.E. Sheikh Sabah al-Khaled al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait, stated: 'Terrorism has become the most prominent security challenge that we face as separate states and as a region (…) Kuwait takes this issue seriously and is an active participant in the global anti-Daesh coalition'.[1229] A Kuwaiti diplomat

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[1224] The three lists are available in Appendix D.
[1225] "Country Report on Terrorism 2017"
[1226] Ibid.
[1227] Kuwait releases detained cleric suspected of financing militants, *Reuters*, 21 August 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kuwait-cleric/kuwait-releases-detained-cleric-suspected-of-financing-militants-idUSKBN0GL1X120140821 (accessed 12 February 2019).
[1228] "Country Report on Terrorism 2017"
[1229] "Interview with HE Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah" in Des Roches (ed.) "GCC Security Amid Regional Crises", p.34.

interviewed by the author also ranked Daesh as the major threat for the country: when asked to elaborate he specified: 'They can elude our security forces and spread violence, so they pose a threat to our people's security. Also, they target mostly Shi'a, with the aim to trigger a reaction from Shi'a militias and ignite a sectarian conflict within the country. It is known that around 30 Kuwaitis have joined Shi'a extremist groups like Hashd al-Shabi in Iraq.'[1230] A 2016 IHS Jane's recent report evaluated that, while Daesh's ability to establish active cells in Kuwait is likely to be constrained, there is an elevated risk of one-off suicide attacks, as well as shooting attacks.[1231] On the other hand, the hesitancies of the regime in the crackdown against charities, radical clerics would not be compatible with the perceptions of the issue as an existential threat. It is possibly more accurate to describe the regime's perceptions of jihadism after 2011 as a severe risk targeting the country's functional integrity. The risk has a military dimension, as the core technique of the group entails the disruption of a country's security architecture, and an economic dimension as it enhances the risk of doing business for international investors in the country. However, it has mostly a strong societal dimension, for its sectarian strategy. While the Kuwaiti regime has, at times, played a sectarian-flavored political game of divide-and-rule, open conflict might structurally disrupt the diverse national fabric. A Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism stated that: 'The Daesh attack in Kuwait in 2015 had a massive impact on sectarian relations which are civil, but delicate. The risk was considered so serious that thirty minutes after the attack, the Emir, Sabah al-Ahmad, visited the scene. In the following days, prayers were held in both Sunni and Shi'a mosques to commemorate the dead. The attitude of the authorities was effective in making the solidarity of the state felt to Shi'a, but the tension was palpable.'[1232] The fact that Kuwait passed laws that criminalize hate speeches, the defamation of religion and discrimination is arguably testament to how crucial is to prevent the burst of a sectarian war, openly advocated by Daesh, in the country.[1233] Finally, jihadi terrorism appears to be perceived as an intermestic risk

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[1230] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018

[1231] Meda Al Rowas, "Islamic State Threat in GCC States", *IHS Markit*, 11 February 2016 https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/islamic-state-threat-in-gcc-states.html (accessed 7 March 2018)

[1232] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism in Kuwait, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018. Very similar points were also raised by Shi'a MP Hamid Dashti, interviewed by Albloshi, for "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: the Case of the Kuwaiti Shiʿa.", p. 123.

[1233] Ragab. "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS."

- emerged out of the state disintegration, widespread violence and geopolitical vacuum characterizing Iraq and Syria, and developing a distinct domestic impact - as most interviewees made reference to the intrinsic connection to regional events and marginal relevance of domestic factors.[1234]

8.5 Kuwait's security priorities after 2011.

While the analysis of the events beginning in 2011 in Kuwait have, as seen previously, exposed some of the country's internal vulnerabilities - which, in turn, heightened the sensitivity on the issues object of this research - the unique political system of the country, together with targeted repression, have proven to be instruments of resilience to the ruling family and the regime. Interestingly, all those interviewed by the author for this research agreed that the regime, although acknowledging the internal challenges and their political, economic and societal implications, did not deem these challenges to be of priority for its own survival.[1235] In other words, viewed through the prism of this thesis' theoretical framework, Iran-backed Shi'a groups, the Muslim Brotherhood or jihadi organizations were not perceived by the regime as having the intent and capabilities to undermine its identity, stability and sovereignty or to the functional integrity of the country's borders or institutions. On the contrary, several interviewees have expressed the views that the rising regional tensions were treated and considered as security priorities by the Kuwaiti regime.[1236]

A small state squeezed among the three major powers of the Persian Gulf, the Kuwaiti leadership's policy-making remains very strongly informed by the Iraqi

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[1234] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism in Kuwait, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018

[1235] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwait government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018. Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018; Interview of the author with a Saudi-Kuwaiti journalist, Kuwait City on 11 December 2018

[1236] Interview of the author with a Saudi-Kuwaiti journalist, Kuwait City on 11 December 2018, Interview of the author with a Kuwait government official, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018. Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti diplomat, London, 13 November 2018; Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti researcher at the Gulf Studies Center and the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait City.

invasion of 1990 and hyper-sensitive to being dragged in regional confrontations, through a policy of calculated neutrality, 'tilting towards but never wholly siding with whatever power seemed most useful, while keeping channels of communication open with all parties.'[1237] This balancing has traditionally been for external purposes as well as for internal equilibrium: with a diverse national fabric, and citizens hailing originally from all around the region, Kuwait has traditionally been exposed to reverberations of regional events, and related deepening of internal rifts and fault lines, as previously explored.

The importance of internal balancing is arguably enshrined also in Kuwait's foundational myth, featuring the country's origins as a merchant port, founded by tribes from the Najd, and attracting merchant families from Iran, Bahrain, eastern Saudi Arabia and Iraq who jointly selected their leadership, built the institutions of the country, and protected the emirate from invasion.[1238] This myth, based on the idea of Kuwait as a consensual monarchy, underpinned by cooperation between merchant families of different ethnic origins and sectarian belonging, is certainly simplistic, but still routinely employed in the narratives about the regime's political behaviour.[1239] A possible explanation is that, in the face of a potential external threat, the radicalization of one specific community, supporting the external challenger, would fatally weaken the small country. In this scenario, external threats, originated exogenously, could morph into intermestic ones.

Hence, a confrontation between Iran and the Gulf Arab states could not only turn Kuwait into a potential target but, in theory, also radicalize part of its Shi'a communities. As for Iraq, while Kuwait has made efforts to normalize relations, and committed to provide much-needed support to the country's re-building, this support has been also been defined as an 'insurance policy' to discourage Iraq from predatory intent.[1240] Given the diversity of the Sunni political camp in Kuwait, the polarization within the GCC, exemplified by the Qatar crisis, could also have a dangerous divisive effect. Beyond that, the Kuwaiti regime also looks at this crisis with the concern of becoming engulfed by it, as the increasingly muscular

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[1237] Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*, p. 21.
[1238] For a more academic view of the narratives that structure Kuwaiti politics see Tétrault, *Stories of Democracy*.
[1239] Ibid.
[1240] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti professor of international relations at Kuwait University, Kuwait City, 13 December 2018

axis between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, has already exerted pressures on the Kuwaiti leadership for support of their policies. An academic researching sectarianism at Kuwait University put it bluntly: 'After 2011, Saudi Arabia has deprived Bahrain of its sovereignty, we don't want to become another Bahrain.'[1241] Middle East scholar Neil Partrick wrote in 2018: 'Visiting Kuwait earlier this year I found a palpable edginess about Saudi Arabia, an ostensible friend, threatening another Gulf Arab state, Qatar, highlighting Kuwait's own vulnerability to the larger regional power. (…) Saudi Arabia would obviously prefer to get Kuwait onside vis-à-vis Qatar, rather than maintain the sub-Nasserite "positively neutral" stance it takes on all regional conflicts.'[1242] In fact, Kuwait maintains working relations with Iran, Qatar and Turkey, all perceived to be rival actors in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

An expert on Kuwaiti politics interviewed by the author in 2018 highlighted that: 'There is real concern that if a succession was to take place in the current polarised regional environment, regional powers could try to exploit the infighting in the royal family to influence the leadership contest and, in turn, affect Kuwait's behaviour in their favour'.[1243] Given the senior age of Emir Sabah, born in 1929, a leadership change might happen soon in Kuwait, amid intensified infighting over succession.[1244] While the 1962 constitution stipulates that the legitimate ruler should be a descendant of the emirate's founder, Mubarak al-Sabah, in practice power alternated between the descendants of Mubarak's sons, Salem and Jaber.[1245] However, when Emir Sabah from the Jaber branch ascended to the throne in 2006, he named his brother, Nawaf al-Ahmed al-Sabah, as his heir, and his nephew, Nasser al-Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah, as Prime Minister, side-lining the Salem branch.[1246] Considering the old age of Nawaf al-Ahmed, born in 1931, younger princes are still competing for succeeding him, including former Prime Minister, heavily contested in 2011, Nasser al-Mohammed, former Deputy

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[1241] Interview of the author with a Kuwaiti academic researching sectarianism in Kuwait, Kuwait City, 11 December 2018
[1242] Neil Partrick, "Kuwait: the Permanent Struggle for Security", 14 August 2018, https://www.neilpartrick.com/blog/kuwait-the-permanent-struggle-for-security (accessed 18 February 2019).
[1243] Interview of the author with an expert of Kuwaiti politics, London, 17 January 2019.
[1244] For details over royal family's politics, see: Azoulay and Beaugrand. "Limits of political clientelism".
[1245] Ibid.
[1246] Ibid.

Prime Minister Ahmed al-Fahd al-Sabah, and the Emir's son and current Minister of Defence and Deputy Prime Minister, Nasser Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah. In particular, as the spat between Nasser al-Mohammed and Ahmed al-Fahd al-Sabah - and their respective supporters, Kuwaiti Shi'a and tribal-Islamist groups - became very public, between 2011 and 2014, it 'caused great friction in Kuwait and culminated in Sheikh Ahmad going into exile in 2015. The situation has calmed down (…) but the presence in exile of such a senior and ambitious contender for succession provides an inroad for potential future interference.'[1247] Crucially, the National Assembly will have to approve the Crown Prince designated, or select another successor from among three alternatives submitted by the Emir.[1248] This provision, on one hand, represent an important mechanism for providing popular legitimacy to the candidate but, on the other hand, can potentially create avenues for external and internal interferences and manipulation of the process.

This acute perception of external threats by the regime, and their prioritization, is exemplified by the surge in defence and security agreements signed since 2016 by Kuwait. In January 2016 NATO inaugurated the NATO-Kuwait Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Center.[1249] In 2018 Kuwait announced that construction was almost completed for the largest US military airport in the Middle East.[1250] In the same year, the UK negotiated to station a small but permanent group of armed forces in Kuwait.[1251] A few months later news surfaced of Kuwait signing a protocol to boost defence industry cooperation with China and an agreement to strengthen military cooperation with Turkey.[1252] The regime has

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[1247] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Exclusionary Turn in GCC Politics" Arab Center in Washington DC, 21 August 2018, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-exclusionary-turn-in-gcc-politics/ (accessed 18 February 2019)

[1248] Azoulay and Beaugrand. "Limits of political clientelism".

[1249] "Activities at NATO-Kuwait ICI Regional Center start", NATO official website, 17 September 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/ra/natohq/news_147010.htm (accessed 19 February 2019)

[1250] Ramadan Al Sherbini, "Key US military air hub to open in Kuwait", Gulf News, 13 July 2018, https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/key-us-military-air-hub-to-open-in-kuwait-1.2250807 (accessed 19 February 2019)

[1251] George Allison, "UK is considering a 'permanent military presence' in Kuwait", UK Defence journal, 19 February 2018, https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/uk-considering-permanent-military-presence-kuwait/ (accessed 19 February 2019)

[1252] Sinem Cengiz, "Kuwait looks to Turkish and Chinese military power", *Arab News*, 19 October 2018, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1390646 (accessed 19 February 2019)

been very active in attempting to invigorate ties to major military powers, in order to address its geopolitical vulnerabilities as a small state.

On the other hand, if geopolitical vulnerabilities and external threats have been prioritised, the prominence given to the other, internal, vulnerabilities, clearly emerging in 2011, remains questionable. Despite having been a major flashpoint for political mobilisation, corruption remained relatively untackled and, in 2018, Kuwait ranked 78 of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, scoring an unimpressive 41 out of 100 in terms of the perception of public sector corruption.[1253] Ostensibly, there was no major change in the socio-political and socio-economic marginalization lamented by the *bidoons*.[1254] Finally, the frequent cycles of elections and parliament dissolution, if persisting, risk eroding the citizens' confidence in the Kuwaiti political system, thus depriving the state itself of a useful source of resilience.[1255]

[1253] "Kuwait," Corruption Perception Index 20178 Transparency International, https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018 (accessed 19 February 2019).

[1254] Beaugrand. *Stateless in the Gulf.*

[1255] A young Kuwaiti activist, interviewed by the author via Skype on 21 January 2019 said: 'There is pride in having a Constitution and the right to voice our opinion among all sectors of Kuwait's population, but there is no confidence in this rigged system, especially among the youth.' A similar point is made also by Mohammad Alwuhaib in "Kuwait: The Crisis and its Future".

9.0 CHAPTER NINE: OMAN

When asked about Oman's posture vis-à-vis the 2017 intra-GCC crisis and the issues identified in the Riyadh Agreements as its triggers, an Omani government official interviewed by the author in April 2018 said: 'Oman finds the positions in Saudi and UAE impossible to agree with.'[1256] Oman officially declared a neutral stance in the crisis, keeping lines of dialogue open with all parties. However, interestingly, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Sa'id sent his State Minister responsible for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf bin 'Alawi bin 'Abdullah, to visit the Qatari Emir in Doha on the same day that the crisis erupted.[1257] Oman also stepped forward as a vital economic partner to Qatar. Following the decision of the UAE to deny entry to its ports of Jebel Ali and Fujairah, the regional refuelling and bunkering hub, Oman opened up the use of its ports, especially Salalah and Sohar, for exporters selling goods to Qatar and to Qatari ships exporting liquefied natural gas.[1258] Transiting through Iranian and Omani waters, was essential for Qatar to avoid the quartet's territorial waters.[1259] Oman's national carrier, Oman Air, launched additional flights to Qatar, as direct flights between Qatar and the four countries involved in the boycott were suspended, turning Muscat Airport in a regional hub for Qataris.[1260] According to Oman's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, from June to September 2017, 'the exchange of products between Oman and Qatar has more than tripled while transactions between the two countries soared by 2,000 percent, reflecting hundreds of millions of dollars in trade'.[1261] This included re-exported goods, a key sector for Oman, to which one the pillars of the economic diversification's strategy is trying to become a logistical hub of the region.[1262] The

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[1256] Interview of the author with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018.
[1257] "Oman's foreign minister on a private trip to Qatar" *Times of Oman*, 6 June 2017, http://timesofoman.com/article/110636/Oman/Oman%27s-foreign-minister-on-a-private-trip-to-Qatar, (accessed 20 July 2017)
[1258] Cafiero and Karasik, "Kuwait, Oman, and the Qatar Crisis".
[1259] Ibid.
[1260] Dominic Dudley, "A Winner Emerges From The Qatar Crisis: Oman's National Airline" *Forbes*, 8 June 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2017/06/08/oman-air-takes-advantage-of-qatar-crisis, (accessed 20 July 2017)
[1261] Qatar-Oman trade volume increases, *The Peninsula*, 10 September 2017, https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/10/09/2017/Qatar-Oman-trade-volume-increases (accessed 19 January 2018)
[1262] A comprehensive overview of the latest strategy is offered in *The National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification (TANFEEDH Handbook)*, published by the

increased trade volume however also included the sale of Oman-produced goods - including food, consumer goods and construction materials – another significant element for a country that is in need to increase the percentage of the non-oil related activities' contribution to its GDP as well as creating non-oil related jobs.[1263]

Unquestionably, the economic and financial motives of Oman's position in the 2017 spat have been paramount, given how the Sultanate's economy has been severely weakened by the 2014 collapse of oil prices.[1264] However, the political motives are also worth highlighting. Facilitating de-escalation between Qatar and its opponents would be in accordance with declared foreign policy objectives under Sultan Qaboos, and the traditional prioritisation of regional stability, a behaviour often ascribed to small states by the literature of international relations.[1265] Additionally, standing by Qatar, even if not openly, might also be a way to safeguard Muscat's own right to an independent foreign policy. Oman has rarely prioritised GCC unity in its foreign policy, as Muscat has rarely seen eye-to-eye with security priorities of other GCC countries.[1266] Arguably, this instance is no different, but at a more sensitive juncture.

In fact, when analysing Oman's threat perceptions after 2011, it is crucial to highlight that its Head of state, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Sa'id, who has ruled since 1970, is class 1940 and in poor health, has no direct heir and has refused to name a successor. The uncertainty over what will happen in the Sultanate after his departure can be objectively identified as the country's main socio-political

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government of Oman in July 2017. The five year plan follows in the footsteps of similar other strategies that, since the early 2000s, have set similar objectives for the country's economic development.

[1263] Ahmed Nawaz Hakro, and Abdallah Mohammed Omezzine. "Oil prices and macroeconomic dynamics of the Oman economy." *The Journal of Developing Areas* 50.1 (2016): pp. 1-27.

[1264] Bilal Pandow, "International practices and situating public debt management in Oman", MPRA Paper No. 85651, published in *Financial sector in Oman developments, issues and prospects*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2018), 2018, p. 8.

[1265] See for instance a classic work on the topic by Robert Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics." *International organization* 23.2 (1969): pp. 291-310.

[1266] Anna Echagüe, "Oman: The Outlier," *Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior*, 27 November 2015, http://fride.org/publication/1279/oman:-the-outlier. (accessed 28 May 2018)

vulnerability.[1267] Even more so considering how the Sultan has deployed a strategy to become the embodiment of the very national identity of the Sultanate: for instance, Oman's National Day is still celebrated on the Sultan's birthday, an extremely powerful symbolism. In addition, given how tightly the Sultan has centralised responsibilities in his hands – he also serves as Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Foreign Minister, as well as overseeing all aspects of the country's finance – it is uncertain how effectively can decision-making happen without his direct involvement. This is an omni-present factor in the security calculus of the Sultanate.

This chapter first explores the most impactful events in the contemporary security thinking of the Sultanate, the Omani chapter of the Arab Spring, a pressure test when key vulnerabilities emerged. The following three paragraphs unpack the Sultanate's contemporary security perceptions on the three issues of Iran and the Shi'a groups, the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi organizations, uncovering how these are not perceived by the leadership as existential threats or as leveraging the country's key vulnerabilities. On the other hand, in the final paragraph it will be argued that the focus of the Omani leadership is on external threats in the form of regional instability, even above the very serious economic challenges affecting the country.

9.1 Oman and the Arab Spring.

When the Arab Spring spread to the GCC, Oman had already been witnessing small scale displays of dissent: since the mid-2000s young educated Omanis took to online forums to call for a greater say in the decision-making process and, in 2010, intellectuals and human rights activists submitted an online petition to the Sultan denouncing corruption among top regime officials and calling for a new constitution with increased parliamentary authority.[1268] Furthermore, in 2010 the

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[1267] The challenges triggered by the Sultan's illness as well as by the uncertainty over succession are explored in details in: Basma Mubarak Said. "The future of reform in Oman", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 9:1, 2016, pp. 49-67.
[1268] Marc Valeri. "Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman.", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2015, p. 8; Ra'id Zuhail Al-Jamali, "Oman, kind of not quiet?" *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/07/oman-kind-of-not-quiet/ (accessed 5 February 2019)

country had witnessed rallies by hundreds of teachers calling for higher pensions and more frequent promotions.[1269] However, as it had been the case in the rest of the region, the Arab Spring worked as a trigger, a push factor that sparked a movement under the name of Green Marches.[1270]

In February 2011, young Omanis started to organise rallies through the Internet and a couple of hundred citizens started to protest corruption, the rising prices of basic goods, asking for larger allowances for water, electricity and housing, and higher wages.[1271] The first instances of such Marches, taking place in Muscat, culminated with Omanis delivering a petition to the Diwan of the Royal Court, addressed to the Sultan himself.[1272] The fact that the petition, whose content will be analysed further on, addressed directly the Sultan with requests for assistance, alongside the presence of banners acclaiming Sultan Qaboos during the demonstrations, were signs of the protesters' loyalty to the Sultan himself, who was at that time exempted from the accusation of corruption laid against government Ministers. Prominent Omani activist Habiba al-Hinai declared in 2014: 'The past ten years, the Sultan was a bit far away. He disappeared—and this is when the corruption built up. [The demonstrators] didn't want to change the Sultan, but rather wanted to see more restrictions placed on the ruling élite.'[1273] In the following days protests and sit-ins spread across the country: to Dhofar, in the south, Sur, and Sohar, site of highest industry concentration in Oman, in the north. In Sohar demonstrations centred around the lack of jobs, and gradually became more sustained as protesters looted administrative buildings attracting the first robust response by the security forces, culminating in the death of a citizen.[1274] Then, on March 1st 2011, the army moved into Sohar to clear the

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[1269] "Oman School Teachers Go on Strike," *Muscat Daily*, 2 February 2011, http://www.muscatdaily.com/Ar- chive/Stories-Files/Oman-school-teachers-go-on-strike. (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1270] A protagonist of the Green Marches wrote a comprehensive account of the Omani Spring in: Said al-Hashimi, *Al-Rabi al-Umani. Qaraa fi al-Siyaqat wa-l-Dalalat* (The Omani Spring: A reading of its context and implications) (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi), 2013.

[1271] Claire Ferris-Lay, "Oman Protestors Call for Fight against Corruption," *ArabianBusiness.com*, 18 January 2011, http://www.arabianbusiness.com/oman-protestors-call-for-fight-against-corruption--374524.html (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1272] Said. "The future of reform in Oman".

[1273] Habiba al-Hinai quoted in: Elizabeth Dickinson, "A Test for Oman and Its Sultan" *The New Yorker*, 8 December 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/will-oman-survive-sultan (accessed 5 February 2019).

[1274] "The Middle East in Crisis: Looters Take Control of Oman's Streets," *Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 2011,

protesters' blockade of the port. While groups supporting the government began to stage demonstrations of loyalty in Muscat, anti-government demonstrations around the country appeared to be growing in size, with even official sources suggesting that 10,000 were now protesting in Salalah and 5,000 in Sur.[1275] Amid the continuation of sustained protesting, the government launched a new crackdown in Sohar at the end of March, issuing the first arrest warrants for some of the protesters. As March went by, despite some concessions made by the Sultan, which are explored in more detail below, protests were still ongoing both in Sohar and Salalah. Between April and May, the government ordered new crackdowns in both location, escalating into violent clashes, including the deployment of the army, arrests and the use of overwhelming force.[1276] Such response drove protests into a limbo: while sustained mobilizations calling for political reforms would start again in the summer of 2012, and sporadic protests and strikes persisted for years, the first, most acute chapter of the Omani Arab Spring, gathering tens of thousands of citizens, could be considered closed.[1277]

The first consideration to make of the events of 2011 would be about the actors involved. Those included many different groups in society: from educated public sectors employees, to industrial workers and, mainly, students and teachers, who head-started the rallies.[1278] There was in fact no defining trait among protesters, that would reconnect them to a single specific group, such as a disgruntled minority, nor was there coordination among the different groups protesting.[1279] It

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http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/oman/8352860/The-Middle-East-in-crisis-Looters- take-control-of-Omans-streets.html. (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1275] "Thousands Attend 'Loyalty to HM' March," *Oman Daily Observer*, 2 March 2011, http://main.omanobserver.om/node/42435; "Celebrations in Sohar, Sur and Salalah Hail Decrees," *Oman Information Center*, 6 March 2011, http:// www.omaninfo.com/news/celebrations-sohar-sur-and-salalah-hail-decrees.asp. (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1276] "1 Dead, 6 Injured as Peace March Turns Violent in Sohar," *Muscat Daily*, 2 April 2011, http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Stories-Files/1-dead-6-injured-as-peace-march-turns- violent-in-Sohar; "Operation Salalah, Army Arrests Protesters," *Muscat Daily*, 14 May 2011, http://www.muscatdaily.com/ Archive/Stories-Files/Operation-Salalah-army-arrests-protesters (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1277] Said Sultan al Hashimi, 'The Omani Spring: towards the break of a new dawn', *Arab Reform Brief* #52, November 2011.

[1278] Ibid.

[1279] The point is made in: Valeri. "Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman.'; al-Hashimi, 'The Omani Spring: towards the break of a new dawn' and was reiterated often in an interview of the author with an Omani diplomat taking place in Rome on 14 May 2018 and in an interview of the author with a former Middle East Adviser at the British Ministry of Defence (London, 16 April 2019).

was of interest that one of the largest-scale protests - allegedly gathering up to 10,000 people - took place in the southern centre of Salahah, the epicentre of a long-lasting leftist insurgency, followed by the Dhofar war.[1280] There in 1965 a youth group, inspired by the wave of Marxist-Leninist ideology sweeping through the Arab world, formed the Dhofar Liberation Front. Their ideological and political struggle, descending into a years-long armed rebellion, was openly hostile to the institution of the Sultanate and strongly pushed for an alternative system for Oman.[1281] When in 2011 some of the protesters in Salalah chanted 'the one who forgets the 1970s should think of the grandchildren of the free men' it was an explicit reference to the Dhofar war.[1282] However, in spite of this heavy historical legacy, the overall lack of violence in the protests and the nature of the protesters' demands didn't offer signs of an insurgent project. One of the main reasons could be that, generally speaking, their demands, as will be later seen in details, lacked an ideological dimension. Additionally, even though many in Oman strongly claim that the United Arab Emirates lent financial support to protesters - especially in Sohar where several cars carrying Emirati plates were allegedly spotted during the protests - in the words of an Omani government official 'this didn't drive people alone, nor did it invalidate people's economic concerns.'[1283] In other words, if, on one hand, the official narrative was that protesters were under foreign influence, this might have been a political tactic to discredit them, and was most often described as a marginal motive in private conversations.[1284]

In reality, there were no signs that overthrowing the regime was on the protesters' agenda, especially at the inception of the protest movement. On March 1st, protesters in Sohar issued a public statement regretting the violence and publically apologizing to the Sultan while stating: 'We have confidence in the

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[1280] A full account of the Dhofar war can be found in: Abdel Razzaq Takriti. *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* . Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2013.
[1281] See: Takriti. *Monsoon Revolution.* After the war, several former dissidents associated with the Dhofar Liberation Front were by and large co-opted, the main example in these regards being Yusuf bin 'Alawi bin 'Abdullah, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs since 1982.
[1282] Valeri. "Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman.", p. 21.
[1283] Interview of the author with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018.
[1284] Interview of the author with an Omani diplomat, Rome, 14 May 2018; Interview of the author with a senior advisor at Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, London, 19 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani government official and member of the royal family, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

Sultan that he will respond to our demands.'[1285] As Marc Valeri highlighted: 'The now famous "The people wants the fall of the regime" (al-sha'ab yurid isqat al-nizam) was re-appropriated in Oman and diverted into "The people wants the reform (islah) of the regime" or "The people wants the fall of the corruption, (isqat al-fasad)".'[1286] The protests had the characteristics of a fully domestic phenomenon centred around socio-economic – and at times highly localised – grievances. The fact that Omanis openly acknowledged the legitimacy of the Sultan in addressing these grievances remains one of the main distinctive features of the Omani spring's inception. In turn, although a security-intense response to the protests was definitely deployed from April 2011 onwards, with legal provisions tightened to criminalise critical opinions and gatherings and the power of the police greatly expanded, the Sultan also opted for engaging with protesters' demands, by granting limited concessions.[1287]

A key demand of the protesters was related to unemployment, one of the main economic vulnerabilities of the country.[1288] The Sultanate in fact shares with Bahrain the highest jobless rate among the six Gulf Cooperation Council states: in 2011 unemployment was approximately at 15 percent, and youth unemployment was even worse, running at over 39 percent.[1289] In fact, Oman is facing, like the rest of the region, a youth bulge, and has not been able to create sufficient jobs to absorb these new entrants to the workforce either in the private sector or in the bloated public sector. While the rentier system, common across the GCC, pushes Omanis to a low-demanding job in the public sector – and a generous welfare system – most jobs in the private sector go to expatriates. This happens not only due to the fewer costs associated to employing a foreigner but, often, also due to the weaknesses in the Omani education system: only 6.2 percent of Omanis have an undergraduate degree, and even educated Omani are not necessarily equipped with the skills sought by employers in the private

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[1285] Sunil K. Vaidya, "Oman Protesters Apologise to Ruler," *Gulf News*, 1 March 2011, http://gulfnews.com/ news/gulf/oman/oman-protesters-apologise-to-ruler-1.769812. (accessed 21 May 2018)
[1286] Valeri. "Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman.", p.9
[1287] Said. "The future of reform in Oman", p. 61
[1288] Al-Jamali, "Oman, kind of not quiet?"
[1289] Romano and Seeger. "Rentierism and Reform", p. 43.

sector.[1290] This is the context in which the protesters demanded higher wages and larger government subsidies, and the opening of a second state-run university.[1291] In this sense, even the most political demands were focused on quintessentially economic matters, centred on the misappropriation of public funds and corruption that generated inequality between the elites and ordinary people. A majority of protesters asked for the firing of National Economy Minister Ahmad Bin Abdul Makki, who was seen as especially corrupt, and other officials, for the same reason. They further petitioned to form an administratively and legally independent authority, from among the Majlis As-Shura members to combat corruption, and authorise them to questioning and auditing ministers' policies, 'particularly those related to the economy and education'.[1292] The petition also included widening the powers of the Majlis As-Shura at the expense of the many state institutions, holding members of security services accountable, strengthening judiciary independence, allowing more freedom of expression.[1293]

On February 27, the government began responding to the petitioners. One of the first measures taken was increasing the minimum salary by 43 percent, the establishment of a monthly allowance for individuals registered as job seekers and to create 50,000 new public sector jobs.[1294] In a move reflective of the heightened security perceptions triggered by the events, most of those were created in the security forces.[1295] Monthly stipends for students, military and security staff were increased, the Social Insurance Pension was raised by 100 percent and pensions were increased by 50 percent. This was followed by a cabinet reshuffle: long-serving ministers widely perceived as embodying corruption – such as 'Ali al Ma'amari, the Minister for the Royal Office; Ahmed Makki, the Minister for National Economy; and Maqbool al-Sultan, the Minister for

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[1290] Sasha Hodgson and Darren Hanson. "Enforcing nationalisation in the GCC: private sector progress, strategy, and policy for sustainable nationalization." *Middle East Journal of Business* 9.2 (2014): p. 21.

[1291] A comprehensive list of the protesters demands appears in: James Worrall, "Oman: The "Forgotten" corner of the Arab spring." *Middle East Policy* 19.3 (2012), p.105

[1292] Ibid.

[1293] Said. "The future of reform in Oman", p. 52

[1294] Tom Arnold, "Oman Raises Minimum Wage for Nationals," *The National*, 17 February 2011, http://www. thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/oman-raises-minimum-wage-for-nationals. (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1295] Interview of the author with an Omani researcher at a market research firm, Muscat, 24 April 2018

Commerce and Industry were replaced by members of the Majlis As-Shura.[1296] In March, the Sultan announced more wide-ranging reforms, which remained only partially implemented, such as the creation of a National Audit Committee tackling corruption, to build a second public university, to give the Majlis As-Shura some legislative and regulatory powers and to make the Public Prosecution Department more autonomous.[1297] In less than a month, the Sultan issued more than 40 decrees and edicts at a pace that was unprecedented in his four decades of ruling.[1298] One of the significant responses was to attempt to engage in consultations with the protesters via intermediaries. This was particularly the strategy in the restive Dhofari region where a prominent tribal figure, belonging to one of the biggest of region's tribes, Sheikh Mustahail bin Ahmed al-Maashani, received dozens of protesters in his *majlis*.[1299] Tribal leaders had been co-opted for decades by the Omani regime through financial concessions or prestigious appointments, but the al-Maashani tribe had an even higher profile. Significantly, as part of the strategy to win over the tribes, intermarriage between the al-Maashani tribe, to which the Sultan's mother belongs, and the royal al-Sa'id family was particularly encouraged in the aftermath of the Dhofar war and Sheikh Mustahail himself is in fact the Sultan's uncle.[1300]

Overall, the government's response to the protests - a mix of confrontation, co-optation and engagement – seems to be directly correlated to the protesters' overall hesitation, with few exceptions, to question the legitimacy of Sultan Qaboos or calling for the overthrow of the regime. Protesters also showed a lack of organizational skills or political leadership, and most civil society organizations remained absent: these elements also may have contributed to a more moderate perception of their threatening capabilities.[1301] According to interviewees both inside and outside government, after an initial shock characterised by the

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[1296] Sunil K. Vaidya, "Sultan Qaboos Reshuffles Oman Cabinet," *Gulf News*, 26 February 2011, http://gulf- news.com/news/gulf/oman/sultan-qaboos-reshuf es-oman-cabinet-1.768277. (accessed 21 May 2018)

[1297] Said. "The future of reform in Oman".

[1298] al Hashimi, 'The Omani Spring: towards the break of a new dawn'.

[1299] Interviews with an Omani diplomat (Rome, 14 May 2018) a senior advisor at Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (London, 19 April 2018) a government official and member of the royal family (Muscat, 24 April 2018), an Omani professor of political science (Muscat, 25 April 2018) included the assessment that such majlis had an impact over protesters in Salalah.

[1300] Ibid.

[1301] al Hashimi, 'The Omani Spring: towards the break of a new dawn', p. 6

unknown of the protests' magnitude, the events of 2011 were not perceived as an existential threat by the regime, but rather as a stress test. While these protests highlighted key socio-economic vulnerabilities in the Sultanate, the regime's threat perceptions were assuaged by its ability to contain the political ramifications of dissent. This, as will be detailed later, remained a priority even over managing socio-economic expectations and interacted unexpectedly with the perception of the intra-GCC crises and related issues.

9.2 Oman and the 'Shi'a threat'.

Oman's perceptions of Iran are affected by a number of factors - including the Sultanate's socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic features and the leadership's ideology - and are grounded in the history of bilateral relations between Muscat and Iran. The historiography of the Sultanate, as embraced by scholars close to the regime itself, underlines how, when Sultan Qaboos became Oman's ruler, he launched efforts to strengthen relations with the outside world and particularly with the country's neighbours, in order to define the borders of the Sultanate.[1302] In this context, Iran was the first neighbouring power to sign a border agreement with Muscat in 1972.[1303] Furthermore, Sultan Qaboos' reign begun in the midst of a leftist revolution in the southern province of Dhofar and, in order to quell the fight, the Sultan actively sought support from Britain as well as regional powers. Among those, Iranian assistance - including logistics, weaponry and at least 3000 men - proved to be truly instrumental to turn the tide to the advantage of the Sultan.[1304] Therefore, in diametrical opposition to the experience inscribed in the collective memory of other GCC countries, Iran represents for the incumbent regime a force supporting its stability rather than aiming at destabilization.

In spite of few incidents of territorial waters' intrusion by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, the bilateral relations were preserved after the Islamic revolution in

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[1302] See Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, pp. 37-48; Jones and Ridout. *A history of modern Oman*.
[1303] Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, p. 10.
[1304] Takriti. *Monsoon Revolution*.

1979.[1305] While Ayatollah Khomeini was threatening to overthrow the GCC regimes and export his revolution on the other side of the Gulf, he reportedly reassured the Omani regime that all existing agreements would be honoured.[1306] Sultan Qaboos was also firmly convinced of that. In 1984 he warned other GCC leaders that 'here in Muscat we do not believe it to be in the interest of security in the Gulf that Iran feels we intend to establish an Arab military pact that will always be hostile to it, or we are about to form a joint force, whose main task is to fight Iran.'[1307] Oman has consistently opposed any plan for military actions against Iran, deeming the fallout from such actions to be profoundly de-stabilising and, therefore, a tremendous risk for its security.[1308] Even when Iran was directly fighting an Arab nation, Iraq, while Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries supported Saddam Hussein, Oman wanted to act as a mediator.[1309] In the 1990s, Oman contributed to facilitating dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, who had cut bilateral relations in 1988.[1310] In the same period, Sultan Qaboos was passing messages to Iranian President Mohammad Khatami on behalf of the US President Bill Clinton.[1311]

Since then, the Omani leadership has facilitated communication repeatedly between the US and Iran, including, noticeably, to reach the 2015 nuclear agreement, the JCPOA. In 2011, then US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Sultan Qaboos secretly to discuss US-Iran direct talks and, in July of 2012, the first meeting between the parties was held in Muscat. The talks progressed while Oman continued to pass messages between the parties and facilitate the process. Finally, the *ad interim* agreement between Iran and the P5+1 was signed in November 2013 and the final version of the JCPOA was approved in July 2015. These diplomatic efforts are both an indication of Oman's inclusive vision in the Gulf, of its willingness to hedge towards Iran to balance against Saudi power and of its attempt to gather political capital to become a valuable player even to global

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[1305] Gawdat Bahgat. "Security in the Gulf: The View from Oman." *Security Dialogue* 30.4 (1999): pp. 445-458.
[1306] Jones and Ridout. *A history of modern Oman*, p. 166.
[1307] Quoted in Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, p. 104
[1308] Interview with Omani diplomat, Rome, 14 May 2018.
[1309] Basma Mubarak Said, "Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union," *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, 6 May 2014.
[1310] Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century", *Middle East Policy Council*, Spring 2010, Volume XVII, Number 1.
[1311] Hanna Kozlowska, "Who is the Shadowy Sultan that Shepherded the Nuclear Deal with Iran?," *Foreign Policy*, 26 November 2013, (accessed 28 May 2018).

powers. Tellingly Oman pursued such diplomatic efforts in spite of the several implications it could have on its position within the GCC, especially given that the talks were kept secret, including from its GCC partners and especially from those, such as Saudi Arabia, who were of the opinion that such deal would have provided Iran with new financial resources for what they perceived as Tehran's destabilizing regional policy.[1312] On the contrary, Yusuf bin 'Alawi, the Omani Minister responsible for Foreign Affairs, has even stated that a nuclear-armed Iran might not be de-stabilizing for the region.[1313]

In particular, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were adamant that Iran had stoked up the flames of the Shi'a protesting against their regimes in 2011, and that Iran was supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the Houthi rebels in Yemen to advance its influence at the detriment of its Arab neighbours.[1314] While Oman sided with the GCC governments during the uprisings, Muscat chose to stay neutral in the Syrian conflict – where Saudi Arabia and Qatar were involved in supporting the opposition to the regime – and refused to join the Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthis started in 2015, exerting efforts for informal negotiations between all Yemeni actors, including the Houthis.[1315] Oman maintained its Yemen policy even amid political pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, leading the military operations in the country.[1316] Muscar further carried on a sensitive balancing act in the context of the Syrian crisis, never breaking diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, hosting its Foreign Affairs Minister repeatedly, and yet also hosting representatives of the Syrian opposition.[1317] Oman subsequently supported the April 2018 airstrikes by the US, France and

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[1312] Said, "Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union".
[1313] Quoted in Kenneth Katzman. "Oman: Reform, Security and Foreign Policy." Congressional Research Service, 27 December 2013, http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21534.pdf, p.14, (accessed 28 May 2018)
[1314] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters*, p. 134.
[1315] Echagüe, "Oman: The Outlier."
[1316] For example, the Saudis and Emiratis had already accused Muscat in October 2016 of undermining the GCC's collective security by not obstructing the smuggling of Iranian weapons to Yemen's Shi'a-aligned Houthi rebels fought by Saudi Arabia, an accusation which Oman's Minister Yusuf bin 'Alawi vehemently denied. Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons supply to Yemen's Houthis via Oman - officials", *Reuters*, 20 October 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX, (accessed 20 July 2017)
[1317] Echagüe, "Oman: The Outlier"; Interview of the author with an Omani journalist, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

the United Kingdom as retribution for the use of chemical weapons by the regime.[1318]

A major factor explaining Oman's perceptions of Iran lies in the lack of socio-political vulnerabilities that make other GCC prone to perceive an Iran-backed 'Shi'a threat'. The Omani Shi'a communities' interaction with the wider Omani society and the leadership has generally been non-confrontational.[1319] There are no known official estimates of the number of Shi'a in Oman, as the government doesn't publish statistics on religious affiliation. However, academic studies have argued that Shi'a citizens represent approximately five percent of the population in Oman, are divided into three main linguistically and ethnically diverse groups: the Lawatiyya, the Baharna, and the 'Ajam.[1320] A key element to consider is the centrality of Shi'a merchants and intellectuals in the Sultan's early efforts of nation-building, aimed at creating a stable political authority amid a context of fragmentation, whereby the country's different socio-political communities had been living either separated from one another or in conflict with each other.[1321] To co-opt the Shi'a communities for the nation-building project, the Sultan employed a policy of inclusion, that would give these communities a stake into the stability of the regime itself. Therefore, generally speaking, Shi'a citizens identify themselves as Omanis and are integrated in the Sultanate's religious, political and economic life. The members of the Lawatiyya, considered the main Shi'a community, who trace their origin to India, run big commercial conglomerates, such as W. J. Towell Group, and hold sizable shares in key economic bodies such as the National Bank of Oman and Petroleum Development Oman.[1322] Members of the family have held senior positions in the government, including posts as cabinet ministers and in the Diwan of the Royal Court.[1323] Some of the Baharna families, who are instead original of Bahrain,

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[1318] Interview with Omani journalist, Muscat, 24 April 2018; Interview of the author with a European diplomat based in Oman, Muscat, 25 April 2018.
[1319] Marc Valeri, "High Visibility Low Profile: The Shi'a in Oman under Sultan Qaboos," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2010.
[1320] Ibid.
[1321] Calvin H. Allen and W. Lynn Rigsbee. *Oman under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970–1996.* (London and Portland: Frank Cass), 2000.
[1322] Khalid M. Al-Azri, *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition* (London: Routledge), 2012, pp. 50–51. An Omani journalist interviewed in Muscat on 24 April 2018 said: "It is the Lawatis who control the money here."
[1323] Valeri, "High Visibility Low Profile".

Iraq, and eastern Saudi Arabia, also hold significant influence. A notable Baharna is Asim al-Jamali who became the country's first Minister of Health and later served as Prime Minister, and another one is Ahmed Bin Abdul Nabi Makki, the powerful and controversial Minister of Economy.[1324] The third Shi'a group, the 'Ajam, trace their origins to ancient Persia and, despite being well assimilated into the Omani society, are in less prominent positions.[1325]

Because of this policy of creating vested interests in regime stability for the Shi'a minorities, as well as the small number of citizens identifying as Shi'a, transnational Shi'a groups have failed to elicit substantial support in Oman.[1326] For instance, there is no local branch affiliated or associated to Hezbollah in the Sultanate. Other international Shi'a movements, strong in the wider Gulf, such as the Dawa and Shirazi groups, don't have much traction with Omani Shi'a. Speaking to US diplomats in 2008, Amr al-Rashdi, then Director of Religious Affairs at the the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, defined Iran's influence over Omani Shi'a a matter of 'low level concern', including because most follow Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani rather than Iranian Ayatollahs for religious or juridical guidance.[1327] Despite this, the communities' activities are still on the radar of the country's internal security services, monitoring foreign Shi'a leaders traveling to Oman during religious festivals to ensure that they do not promote political agendas. However, overall, Oman's susceptibility to the perceived threat of Iranian meddling is very limited. As an additional side note, possibly given their relative positive economic status, the 2011 protests in Oman were not centred on grievances specific to Oman's Shi'a communities, nor included a Shi'a-specific movement.[1328] This was a very visible difference vis-à-vis, for instance, protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which on the other hand showed a deep fault line within the national fabric and, arguably, a socio-political vulnerability of the respective nation-states.

[1324] Zaynab Motaqizada,"Shia'yan Oman"[Oman's Shi'ites],in *Joghra ya- e Siasi Shi'yan Manteqa Khalij Fars* [Political Geography of Shi'ites in the Persian Gulf] (Qom, Iran: Shia Shenasi Publisher, 2005), p. 129.

[1325] Valeri, "High Visibility Low Profile", p. 254

[1326] Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*, p. 146 – 149.

[1327] "Shi'a Islam in Oman," *WikiLeaks,* 22 July 2008, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MUSCAT540_a.html (accessed 28 May 2018)

[1328] Said. "The future of reform in Oman".

In terms of Oman's key vulnerabilities, the socio-economic ones, Iran was even defined, in interviews taken by the author, as a potential source of stability. An Omani professor of international relations interviewed in Muscat in April 2018 said: 'Iran can be a crucial and much-needed economic partner for Oman.'[1329] An Omani researcher working at a market research firm argued that 'reintegrating the Islamic Republic into the international community after a decades-long embargo, could potentially open up a huge market for exporting Omani goods or international products via Oman'.[1330] Becoming a regional logistic hub was indeed identified in several state development plans, including the 9th Five-Year Development Plan (2016-2020) and the National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification (Tanfeedh), as a major goal in Oman's strategies for diversification and growth, to address its significant economic challenges.[1331] For the economic diversification program to succeed, maintaining good relations with its large neighbour is important to Oman. According to an Omani economist and researcher at a market research firm, the unfreezing of Iran's assets would have provided capital for Iranian investments in the Omani economy, where joint ventures would have created employment opportunities as well as spur the private sectors in both rentier states.[1332] Iran is also an important energy partner for Oman, as both countries share some major oil and natural gas fields, like the off-shore Hengham oilfield or the Henjam/Bukha gas field, jointly developed since 2006.[1333] Moreover, Oman shares with Iran control over the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which 17 billion barrels of oil - 20 percent of global volume - are transported every day.[1334] To keep the Strait safe and open for navigation, Oman has to cooperate with Iran, and has done so since 1995, with several agreements

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[1329] Interview of the author with an Omani professor of international relations, Muscat, 25 April 2018.

[1330] Interview of the author with an Omani researcher at a market research firm, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

[1331] See for example the government's The National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversifation (Tanfeedh), redacted in 2016 and available at http://www.tanfeedh.gov.om/, and The 9th Five-Year Development Plan (2016-2020), the Supreme Council for Planning, Sultanate of Oman, 2016, https://www.scp.gov.om/PDF/NinthfiveyearplanEnglish.pdf (accessed 24 May 2018).

[1332] Interview of the author with an Omani researcher at a market research firm, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

[1333] Kenneth Katzman. "Oman: Reform, Security and Foreign Policy.", p. 15.

[1334] "World Oil Transit Chokepoints", *US Energy Information Administration*, Last Updated: 25 July 2017, https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/special_topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf (accessed 23 May 2018)

inked regarding smuggling, border intelligence sharing and joint exercises.[1335] Furthermore, in 2014 Oman and Iran agreed regarding the construction of a pipeline providing Oman with convenient Iranian gas to cover its energy needs and, potentially, re-export towards India.[1336] All of these economic opportunities, explored in an intense exchange of visits after the signing of the deal, would be beneficial for the vulnerable economic development of the Sultanate, where the real risk to stability was perceived in 2011.

Oman's history of engagement with Iran and Iranian regional policy, the shared political and economic interests and the absence of a deep sectarian fault line in the country, are sufficient elements to argue that Oman does not perceive Iran as a threat as defined by this study, i.e. as a force willing and able to pose an existential danger to the regime's stability and identity, or the functional integrity of the country's boundaries and its institutions. The period 2011-2017, under consideration in this study, maked no exception. This perception was confirmed in a series of interviews conducted by the author, including with a senior advisor to Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an Omani government official, who argued that Iran never showed intent to challenge the fundamental structures of sovereignty in the Sultanate.[1337] As Omani scholar Basma Mubarak Said argued in 2014, Iran 'has never posed a threat to Oman's internal stability or undermined its national unity' and, on the contrary, Oman sees regional confrontation with Iran as a direct threat to the internal stability and security of the country, two elements she identifies as 'the key determinant dictating the Sultanate's foreign policies and its criteria for distinguishing enemies from friends'.[1338]

9.3 Oman and the 'Islamist threat'.

The area studies literature has traditionally described the influence and presence of Sunni Islamist organizations in Oman, chiefly the Muslim Brotherhood, as more

[1335] "Iran, Oman Ink Agreement on Defensive Cooperation," Payvvand Iran news, 8 August 2010, http://www.payvand.com/news/10/aug/1043.html, (accessed 28 May 2018); "Oman, Iran navies hold search and rescue drill," *Oman Observer*, 7 April 2014, http://main.omanobserver.om/?p=71350, (accessed 28 May 2018)

[1336] Ayush Gupta and Bhavesh Gupta. "Sourcing of Natural Gas Through Cross Border Pipelines." *Natural Gas Markets in India*. (Singapore: Singapore, 2017), p. 50.

[1337] Interview with Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018; Interview with a senior advisor to Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, London, 19 April 2018.

[1338] Saeed, "Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union."

limited than in other GCC countries such as Kuwait or Saudi Arabia.[1339] In the country, many argue that this is related to the group's Sunni roots and the fact that Sunnis are not a majority in Oman.[1340] However, it would seem even more relevant to consider it a direct consequence from two crackdowns operated by the government against Islamist groups in the past. In addition, any analysis of government-Islamist relations in Oman cannot overlook the historical context of the long existential fight between the Ibadi Imamate and the Sultanate.[1341]

In the spring of 1994, Omani authorities interrogated roughly 430 people, arrested over 300 and tried about 130, most of them from within the Omani Sunni community. Those who were tried, were charged for joining a 'subversive group, conspiring to damage the Sultanate's national unity and misusing the Islamic faith'.[1342] This large-scale arrest were reported to have been triggered by a public letter accusing the Omani government of being too much influenced by the West for letting Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and other Israeli officials visit the Sultanate.[1343] Interpreting the letter as an attack against the Sultan's legitimacy on grounds of religious ideology, the state's apparatus perceived the operations as a threat to the stability of the regime.[1344] The heavy-handed response was an indication of said perceptions, fuelled, according to a senior advisor to Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by two factors: that members of said organizations occupied positions within the state's bureaucracy, that the group was believed by the authorities to have a cohesive, semi-institutionalised internal structure.[1345] The arrested included mid-ranking officials, such as a former Omani ambassador

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[1339] See for example Courtney Freer "The changing Islamist landscape of the Gulf Arab States". Issue Paper 9, *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, Washington, DC, 2016; or Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, " The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?" *Middle East Policy*, Volume XXIV, Number 1, Spring 2017 or Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: Prospects for Agitation" Policy Analysis, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 10 June 2013.

[1340] Interview with an Omani journalist, Muscat, 24 April 2018; Interview with an Omani professor of political science, Muscat, 25 April 2018.

[1341] For a comprehensive account on the history of the Imamate in Oman, cfr. John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1987.

[1342] Quoted in Hedges and Cafiero, " The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood"

[1343] Joel Greenberg, "Rabin Visits Oman, Taking Step to Widen Link to Gulf Region," *New York Times*, 28 December 1994.

[1344] Interview with an Omani professor of political science, Muscat, 25 April 2018.

[1345] Interview of the author with a senior advisor at Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, London, 19 April 2018.

to the United States, Muhammad al-Rasi, a former air-force commander, Talib Biram and two Undersecretaries, Khamis Mubarak al-Khayumi (undersecretary for industry) and Musallim Salim (undersecretary for fisheries).[1346] The arrest of Muhammad al-Ghazali, a religious leader from a wealthy family in Oman's southernmost Dhofar governorate, is noteworthy as he belongs to the same family of one of the founders of the Dhofar Liberation Front.[1347] In the statement then released by Oman's Information Ministry, the group was accused to be 'linked organizationally and financially with foreign parties.'[1348] According to the perspective of a government official, those individuals were members of an Omani branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, connected and affiliated with the 'global mother organization in Egypt and similar groups in other Arab and GCC countries, mostly Saudi Arabia'.[1349] The sentences given by the State Security Court was of imprisonment ranging from three to 15 years for almost all of those arrested and tried, while two received death sentences.[1350] However, Sultan Qaboos later commuted the death sentences into life imprisonment and, a year later, in November 1995, signed an amnesty freeing all those arrested in the context of the investigation.

A new and potentially more significant incident took place ten years later. In January 2005, it was reported that around 100 people had been arrested by the Omani authorities for being involved in a 'religious extremist' plot and 'an attempt to form an organization to tamper with national security.'[1351] Among those arrested were military officers and civil servants, Islamic scholars, preachers and University professors, including several individuals identifying as belonging to the Ibadi sect. Allegedly, the group was plotting terrorist attacks against the Muscat cultural festival, an event that had infuriated a number of Islamists, who considered it a violation of Islamic values.[1352] The individuals arrested were connected to the discovery of a cache of weapons in a truck that included

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[1346] "Muslim Brotherhood Cited in Oman Plot," *United Press International*, 30 August 1994

[1347] Allen and Rigsbee. *Oman under Qaboos,* p. 10.

[1348] Abdullah Baabood, "Islamism in the Gulf region" in Khaled Hroub, (ed.), *Political Islam: context versus ideology* (London: Saqi, 2010), p. 68

[1349] Interview with an Omani professor of political science, Muscat, 25 April 2018.

[1350] "Muslim Brotherhood Cited in Oman Plot," *United Press International*,

[1351] Quoted in Hedges and Cafiero, " The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood"

[1352] "Oman jails 31 for plotting coup", *BBC*, 2 May 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4505075.stm (accessed 22 May 2018)

'computers, cameras, a GPS system, about 40 Kalashnikov rifles, revolvers, maps of Oman, about 35 books dealing with military training, explosives and how to face interrogations, as well as a large quantity of ammunition.'[1353] In the spring of 2005, the government stated that, 'after the investigation, 31 people had been arrested and charged for conspiring in secret meetings; establishing, joining or financing a militia with several small cells functioning in different parts of the country called the al-Bashaer group; plotting to take over the country's energy fields; trading and smuggling weapons illegally; spreading the organization's message through indoctrination'.[1354] The accused confessed to some of the charges while denying their intent to overthrow the government and claiming that their intention were to spread Ibadi jurisprudence and teachings and to fight deviance from the faith as a result of external influence.[1355] On May 2, 2005, six defendants, identified as masterminds of the movement, received 20-year sentences; 12 were sentenced to ten years imprisonment, another 12 for seven years and one for one year in prison as he was acquitted of seeking to overthrow the regime, and only sentenced for holding weapons without a license.[1356] All 31 were pardoned by Sultan Qaboos a month later. According to a scholar expert in Omani history, the dominant sentiment among members of the regime was consistent with the state's narrative: that one of the main goals of the organization was to forcefully topple the regime and restore the Imamate ruling in Oman.[1357] Crucially, most of the accused were in fact from the region around Nizwa, the historical capital of the Omani Imamate and the epicentre of the conflict between the Sultanate and the Imamate in the 1950s, located in the country's conservative interior region.

The Imamate was a millenary institution ruling over the Omani interior since around the year 750, led by Ibadi imams – who had spiritual and temporal authority over their territories – and whose political theory 'rigorously

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[1353] N. Janardhan, "Islamists Stay Clear of Terrorism in Oman," *Jamestown Foundation*, 9 March 2006.
[1354] Ibid.
[1355] Baabood, "Islamism in the Gulf region", p. 69
[1356] "Oman sentences members of secret group between one to 20 years", *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, 2 May 2005, https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticlePrintPage.aspx?id=1563531&language=en (accessed 25 May 2018)
[1357] Interview of the author with an Abu Dhabi –based expert on Oman, email, 20 April 2018

excluded…any notion of a hereditary Imamate,' though it tended, in specific periods, to slip into into 'dynastic power'.[1358] Between the 1850s and the 1950s, amid rising tensions for political and religious authority, the Imamate co-existed with the reign of Sultan Qaboos' father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, who ruled mostly over the coastal areas of today's Oman. In 1954, open conflict erupted between Imam Ghalib bin Ali Al Hinai and Sultan Said bin Taimur Al Said, the *casus belli* being over the right to the energy revenues for oil fields in contested territory.[1359] It is worth noting how a sizable part of the literature produced on these historical events, thoroughly embraced by the narrative of the modern Sultanate, has characterized the Imamate fighting as a 'rebellion' or an 'insurgency', despite the fact that the Imam and the Sultan were, in fact, simply rival claimants to ruling authority.[1360] As the Imamate forces were initially quickly defeated by the Sultan's forces, with the support of British-led paramilitary groups, Imam Ghalib's brother, Talib bin Ali Al Hinai, retreated to Saudi Arabia. He then formed the Oman Liberation Army with financial and training support from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and returned to Oman waging a new phase of the guerrilla in 1957.[1361] The Sultan was able to prevail only thanks to vigorous British support, which included air force, and finally forced the Imamate fighters to surrender their safe haven in the mountainous region of Jebel Akhdar only in 1959.[1362] The Sultan declared the Imamate over and officially extended his control on the country's interior. However, the Imam and few other leaders from the Oman Liberation Army fled once again to Saudi Arabia, where they continued to intermittently plot small-scale operations to destabilise the regime.[1363]

The Sultanate and the Imamate represented, as mentioned, also two different ruling models: while the Imamate was, at least in its ideology, a fundamentalist Islamic semi-theocracy, Sultan Said bin Taimur never aimed at such a strong religious legitimacy and in fact turned down the additional title of Imam offered to

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[1358] Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*, pp. 169-76.
[1359] Ibid., p. 182
[1360] See for instance J. E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy*, (London: Saqi), 2008.
[1361] J. E. Peterson, "Britain and the Oman War: An Arabian Entanglement," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1976
[1362] Ibid.
[1363] Ibid.

him by tribal leaders in 1948.[1364] Since 1970 Sultan Said's son, Qaboos, framed his reign as primarily focused on – and, to a certain extent, legitimised by - bringing social and economic development to Oman, then an underdeveloped nation.[1365] Scholarly works on Oman have effectively dissected the emphasis in the official discourse on the role of the Sultan into triggering and delivering what is usually called a time of *nahda* (renaissance) for Oman, considered a re-birth from a comatose past before Sultan Qaboos.[1366] This approach made arguably more sense that to compete with the Imamate on the grounds of claiming religious legitimacy to rule. Still, Sultan Qaboos also embarked on an effort to re-shape the religious ingredient of the national identity mix, attempting to enshrine ideas of tolerance and moderation as structural features of the domestic and international discourse around Omani Ibadi Islam.[1367] An Omani diplomat interview in Rome by the author claimed that: 'By promoting ideas of moderation relentlessly for four decades through public education, religious indoctrination, media discourse and political rhetoric at all levels, Sultan Qaboos almost made religious moderation and tolerance elements of the country's national identity'.[1368] The intent was also to shape an ideological environment that wouldn't provide fertile ground for Islamist groups. By rejecting all extremism and fundamentalism as alien to Oman, 'it is hoped that Islamist groups would have less traction in the country' and, therefore, their capabilities to become a serious threat to the regime would be limited.[1369]

Overall, there are a number of factors that appear to indicate that Islamists are not perceived as an existential threat by the Omani leadership, especially in the contemporary times object of this study. First and foremost, it is telling that Sultan Qaboos opted for a strategy of co-optation with former dissidents supporters of

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[1364] Dale Eickelman. "From theocracy to monarchy: authority and legitimacy in inner Oman, 1935–1957." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17.1 (1985): p. 12
[1365] This point was raised by an Omani diplomat interviewed by the author in Rome in 14 May 2018, as well as frequently reiterated in the Sultan's speeches and public discourse, such as in his interview with Judith Miller published in "Creating Modern Oman: An Interview with Sultan Qabus", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1997, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/oman/1997-05-01/creating-modern-oman-interview-sultan-qabus (accessed 5 February 2019).
[1366] See for instance Mandana Limbert. *In the time of oil: Piety, memory, and social life in an Omani town.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2010.
[1367] Dale Eickelman, "National Identity and Religious Discourse in Contemporary Oman," *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies* 6 (1) (1989): pp.1-20.
[1368] Interview of the author with an Omani diplomat, Rome, 14 May 2018.
[1369] Ibid.

the Imamate since the inception of his rule. For instance, a nephew of Imam Muhammad al-Khalili became Oman's first Minister of Education while descendants from other families of former Imam, such as the Kharusi and Hina'i families, told today positions of prestige and responsibility in the state's structure, including in Ministries and security forces.[1370] Omanis from the interior regin around Nizwa have also held several positions in the security forces, but also in the Ministries of Interior, Justice, National Heritage and Culture, as well as at Sultan Qaboos University.[1371] Another element which seems worth noticing is that, while both in 1995 and 2005 there were mass arrests of individuals connected to Islamist ideology, and dozens were subsequently sentenced to very severe punishments, they were all given amnesty and pardoned in a matter of months by the Sultan. Moreover it seems indicative that Salah Soltan - a well-known Muslim Brotherhood figure close to Yusuf Qaradawi, who held a post in the administration of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt – was allowed to live in Oman and teach at University level in the years following the first crackdown on Islamists, from 1995 to 1998.[1372]

With regards to contemporary times, individuals that could be identified as Islamists did take part, in small numbers, to the 2011 protests, both in Sohar and in Salalah and the influence of underground Muslim Brotherhood cells was 'visible'.[1373] However, their demands seconded the socio-economic grievances of the wider population, adding a generic call for more conservatism in societal customs and specific, local issues such as the establishment of Islamic banks in the country, a request that the Sultan approved in May 2011.[1374] At a regional level, when in 2013 Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait supported the military coup by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi against the Brotherhood-led government of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt, Oman did not take a distinct side but criticized the post-coup crackdown on Brotherhood supporters in the country.[1375] In an interview with the author, an Omani diplomat expressed regret that the Egyptian

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[1370] Allen and Rigsbee. *Oman under Qaboos.*
[1371] Marc Valeri, "The Ṣuḥār Paradox: Social and Political Mobilisations in the Sultanate of Oman since 2011", *Arabian Humanities* 4/2015, 12 April 2015, http://journals.openedition.org/cy/2828 (accessed 25 May 2018)
[1372] Interview of the author with an Omani diplomat, Rome, 14 May 2018
[1373] Valeri. "Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman.", p.10
[1374] Ibid., p.11
[1375] Kenneth Katzman, "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy", CRS Report for Congress, US Congressional Research Service, (Updated: 17 January 2019), p. 15

political space had been so fiercely sealed to non-violent Islamists, citing the repression as a potential root cause for further radicalization of the group and therefore, political violence.[1376] This seems to show an inconsistency with the approach of the Sultanate itself, where, as mentioned, two crackdowns were carried on Islamist-leaning groups in the 1990s and 2000s. Perhaps the contradiction would be resolved if contextualised in the perception that the Islamist groups repressed in Oman might not have had, according to the interlocutor, the capacity to trigger widespread political violence. Still, An Omani journalist interviewed by the author in Muscat in April 2018 remarked how the Brotherhood certainly does operate in the country, but in a secretive way given that being openly a member of the Brotherhood is a criminal offense and may result in being blacklisted from holding public office.[1377]

This eclectic approach, mixing gestures and rhetoric of tolerance with instances of repression, would indicate that the potential political danger posed by Islamism, be it Sunni or Ibadi, has been so far deemed manageable by state authorities. Given their limited capabilities, the prospects for Islamist groups to become dominant actors in the Sultanate's political, social and religious landscapes are relatively dim. Still, should the Islamists join forces with other groups and ride a common cause, this could lead to the reopening of old political fissures in the country's politics. Indeed Islamism has the historical legacy and the ideological charge to be perceived as having a potential political dimension and, given Oman's high degree of socio-political diversity, a societal dimension. Overall, seen through the prism of this thesis' theoretical framework, Islamists may be described as the source of a risk rather than a threat, in the perceptions of the Omani regime, including between 2011 and 2017.

9.4 Oman and the 'jihadi threat'.

Academics, authors in the area studies literature, international think tanks and security consultancy have all published pieces arguing that jihadi terrorism is not be an issue of major concern within Oman, both in terms of the numbers of Omanis involved in jihadi organizations and in terms of financial or other support

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[1376] Interview of the author with an Omani diplomat, Rome, 14 May 2018
[1377] Interview of the author with an Omani journalist, Muscat, 24 April 2018

coming from the Sultanate.[1378] Since 2001, the Omani government has been very active in cooperating with the international community on counter-terrorism. This included cooperation on training, intelligence sharing, joint patrol operations, enforcing international legal frameworks, and countering terrorism financing.[1379] For instance, in 2005 the US diplomatic team in Muscat assessed that: 'Oman is a successful example of cooperation in the Global War on Terrorism' and 'Oman is inhospitable terrain for would-be terrorist financiers.'[1380] Similar assessments were consistently confirmed in the US State Department's Country Terrorism Reports from 2005 to 2016, when the report stated that Oman is the GCC country's least at risk of terrorism financing or money laundering.[1381] Reasons for such assessments include having a stringent banking oversight regime, monitoring a small banking and financial community. In 2016 a Royal Decree, number 30/2016, has further strengthened the pre-existing legal framework on anti-money laundering and combatting terrorism financing by requiring financial institutions to screen transactions even for small sums.[1382] In addition, there are wide-ranging limitations on the operations of Islamic banks and Islamic charities, elsewhere often exploited as vehicles for channelling funding to terrorist organizations.[1383] The *hawala*, a traditional system for money transfer which is routinely used to provide donations to jihadi groups, is officially not permitted, although restrictions are not thoroughly enforced.[1384]

As a result, there have been very few arrests made in conjunction with terrorism financing. One of the most renown has taken place in 2009 when an Omani businessman, Ali Abdul Aziz al-Hooti, was sentenced to life in prison for channelling funds to a Pakistan-based terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. Born to an Indian mother, al-Hooti's radicalisation would appear to have consolidated

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[1378] See Ragab. "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS"; Al Rowas, "Islamic State Threat in GCC States".
[1379] Kenneth Katzman "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy.", RS21534, Congressional Research Service, 26 April 2016.
[1380] "Global War on Terrorism Assessment: Oman", 05MUSCAT573_a, *Wikileaks*, 6 April 2005, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05MUSCAT573_a.html (accessed 24 May 2018).
[1381] "Country Report on Terrorism 2016", United States Department of State Publication, Bureau of Counterterrorism, July 2017.
[1382] Katzman "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy."
[1383] Ibid.
[1384] Ibid.

in his visits to Pakistan.[1385] Back in Oman, he worked with Lashkar operatives of Indian and Pakistani nationality using his businesses as camouflage for funnelling funds to jihadists in India and Pakistan. While the operational focus of the group appeared to be in the Indian subcontinent, the suspects were also accused of having considered multiple terrorist attacks in Oman.

In fact, no major terrorist incident has been recorded in the country. There were a series of individual assaults on westerners residing in Oman between 2003 and 2004, including a shooting against a British chief executive officer of Muscat Private Hospital in September 2004 and against a European tourist in October 2003.[1386] Additionally, an alleged al-Qa'ida cell was broken up in 2002, but the fact was very succinctly reported by only few press outlets, and never appeared in international reports, details are lacking.[1387] Over the years, no Omani national has been identified among senior members of al-Qa'ida or its branches and no Omani national has ever been held in the Guantanamo Bay prison, the US penitentiary for suspected terrorists. As with regards to Daesh, there is no official information regarding recruitment in the Sultanate, and estimates vary greatly. While in July 2014 Omani journalist Turki al-Balushi estimated that around 200 Omanis had joined military groups in Syria, a 2015 report by the UK-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) alleged that no Omanis had joined the group at all.[1388] While the latter seems an overly optimistic assumption, and no specific number can be claimed with confidence, it is also worth noting that a large number of sources, while

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[1385] Details on the case of Ali Abdul Aziz al-Hooti can be found in: Animesh Roul, "Lashkar-e-Taiba's Financial Network Targets India from the Gulf States", *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 7 Issue: 19, 2 July, 2009.

[1386] Francis Field, "Expats on alert after Oman shooting" *BBC*, 29 September 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3700886.stm (accessed 24 May 2018).

[1387] The event is mentioned in: J.E. Peterson, "Oman: Three and a Half Decades of Change and Development", *Middle East Policy*, Volume XI, Summer 2004, Number 2 quoting an Arab News article of 26 August 2002 but doesn't appear, for instance, in the US' Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism.

[1388] The report "Who Inspires the Syrian Foreign Fighters", by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) is quoted in: Fahad Al Mukrashi, "No Omanis have joined Daesh monitoring group says", *Gulf New*s, 1 July 2015, https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/oman/no-omanis-have-joined-daesh-monitoring-group-says-1.1544007, (accessed 24 May 2018).

presenting different number, have agreed on a lower number of Omani recruits joining Daesh in relation to other nationalities in the MENA region.[1389]

A correlation can be drawn with the aforementioned factor that dominant religious narratives in Oman, backed by the government, have striven to enshrine the rejection of extremism into the country's socio-cultural identity. For years, Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs has conducted advocacy campaigns designed to encourage inclusive Islamic practices, including: a campaign entitled 'Islam in Oman', an interfaith program highlighting commonalities between Islam's sects and between Islam and other religions entitled 'Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence: Oman's Message of Islam'; the organization of an International Day for Tolerance.[1390] In addition to promoting counter-extremism programs, the Omani government maintains a tight control on the media, as well as the political and religious discourse. While in other GCC countries a number of individuals with political and religious authority have been known to encourage young people to go fight abroad, the Omani authorities have consistently discouraged Omani citizens to participate in regional conflicts, since the Afghanistan war.[1391] Religious authorities are monitored, when they are not directly engaged in the efforts. In 2014 the Grand Mufti of Oman, Sheikh Ahmed al-Khalili, published a public essay calling on all Muslims to reject extremism, and he regularly uses his platform in a popular and widely broadcast weekly television program to reiterate similar messages.[1392] Omani scholar Khalid Al-Azri argued in his 2013 book *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition* that, in fact, this insistence on Ibadism as a doctrine based on tolerance and moderation was both instrumental for the Sultan's identity-building project and has been used to contrast the danger posed by Wahhabi fundamentalism, as perceived by the Sultanate.[1393] By the 1970s, Oman had been through two civil conflicts, the war against the Imamate and the Dhofari war,

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[1389] Benmelech and Klor. "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?."; Ragab. "The Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countering ISIS".
[1390] "Country Report on Terrorism 2016"; Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler. "The Caliphates Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic States Foreign Fighter Paper Trail." United States Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center, (West Point, United States), 2016; Elena Pokalova, "Driving Factors behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2018.
[1391] Interview of the author with an Omani diplomat, Rome, 14 May 2018.
[1392] "Country Report on Terrorism 2016"
[1393] Al-Azri. *Social and gender inequality in Oman*.

and had been attracting immigrants of Omani descents who had emigrated to Africa and Asia with the prospects of significant oil-induced economic development. It was a racially, linguistically, religiously and culturally diverse and potentially conflictual society, who had to be turned into a nation. In these regards Al-Azri writes that: 'The post-1970 Omani state has therefore invented its own tradition for its socio-political goals: to unite a divided country, and to ensure political legitimacy for an unknown Sultan. […] the Omani government seems to have maintained the view that religion is an integrating force in society, since it can reinforce shared norms and values and help reduce conflict.'[1394]

Against this backdrop, the influence of Wahhabism, Saudi clerics and – by extension – the Saudi regime in Oman, was regarded as very problematic by the Sultan, especially between the 1980s and the 1990s, to the point that 'a government committee was set up, constituting members from the Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs, including members from the Office of Ifta'a, the Oman Internal Security, the Ministry of Information, and the Royal Court among others. . . . The aims were to find the appropriate methods to enhance Omani national identity amongst the youth of the country, to instil in them pride about their heritage and of course to combat the growing Wahhabi threat in the coastal areas of Oman.'[1395] In the official Omani religious and political discourse, Wahhabism has become interchangeable with extremism and has continued to attract hostility well after the 1990s.

Amid this context, generally speaking, it can be said that Oman does not display the kind of socio-political conditions that can be easily exploited by jihadi organizations. A general perception that Oman would have very low vulnerability to terrorist attacks by Daesh has also emerged during fieldwork. An expert on Oman based in the region interviewed in 2018 said: 'It is highly unlikely that jihadi terrorism can pose a real threat to Oman: the country can benefit from a strong intelligence apparatus and the ideology doesn't have much traction to begin with.'[1396] An Omani government official said: 'Here we don't feel a domestic threat and, on the contrary, we are confident to provide an environment discouraging extremism. For these reasons we have accepted several detainees from

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[1394] Ibid., p. 113.
[1395] Quoted in Al-Azri, *Social and gender inequality in Oman,* p. 112
[1396] Interview of the author with an Abu Dhabi –based expert on Oman, email, 20 April 2018.

Guantanamo Bay: we don't fear the contagion and we believe we can assist them in reintegrating into society.'[1397] During a 2016 meeting with a delegation from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group, high level security officers from Oman agreed that, in their view, the main security challenge emanating from these terror groups is not that they could take roots in the Sultanate and attack it, but that they could use its territory as a transit country.[1398]

There is a precedent for that: in 2012, several suspected terrorists, identified by the government as militants of AQAP, illegally entered southern Oman from Yemen.[1399] With the country plunged into full-on violence and chaos, after the Houthi rebels' military campaign in 2014 as well as the Saudi-led war in 2015, the presence of jihadi organizations such as AQAP and Daesh in the eastern desert region of Yemen has significantly increased.[1400] The two organizations are known to have established training camps in the Hadramawt region, and AQAP even holds pockets of territory including, from 2015 to 2016, the port city of Mukalla. These dynamics have raised the level of concerns in Oman's security perceptions.[1401] Muscat fears a spill-over of Yemen's instability, and the Omani government has deployed additional security forces to the border with Yemen and built a 180-mile fence along the border in a bid to prevent to extremist groups from using the Sultanate as a haven or transit point.[1402] Given how Oman has a long coastline, and is strategically located overlooking the Strait of Hormuz and in proximity to important maritime trading routes, important security challenges for Oman include attacks against international cargos in the Strait.[1403] Overall, considering the elements highlighted, it may be assessed that, especially

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[1397] Interview of the author with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018.
[1398] "Mission Report", NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group, 26 – 28 September 2016, Muscat (Sultanate of Oman).
[1399] "Country Report on Terrorism 2016"
[1400] "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base", Report 174, *International Crisis Group*, 2 February 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base (accessed 24 May 2018).
[1401] Interview of the author with an Omani analyst of strategic affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; The theme was discussed at length by the two Omani officials present at the workshop "Polarization in the MENA: what is the European role?" organised by the European Council on Foreign Relations on the side of the Doha Forum, Doha, 17 December 2018
[1402] Interview of the author with an Omani analyst of strategic affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018
[1403] "Mission Report", NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

between 2011 and 2017, in Oman jihadi organizations are perceived as posing a risk rather than a threat capable to damage the regime's stability and identity or the country's borders and functional integrity, and, specifically, given the perceived lack of a domestic relevance, an external risk with a military - though asymmetrical – dimension and an economic dimension, given potential attacks to the Strait of Hormuz.

9.5 Oman's security priorities after 2011.

The three issues identified by the Riyadh Agreements as threats to GCC security have appeared to be, through an in-depth analysis as well as through the opinions of sources interviewed in the Sultanate, as per this thesis's definitions, risks rather than full-fledged threats in the perceptions of the Omani regime. During the several interviews conducted in the Sultanate in 2018, two main issues have emerged as substantially more central in the regime's security agenda after the Arab Spring: economic insecurity and political instability in the region. However, important nuances emerged in terms of prioritisation.

Certainly the 2011 protests' wave left a mark in the Sultanate: government initiatives to address youth unemployment as well as pushing economic diversification, together with the concerns for low energy prices, have indeed been the focus of the public discourse in Oman since.[1404] In 2011, the government published its highest budget ever – by a margin of 29 percent – to cover emergency measures to address protesters' demands.[1405] Half of this budget was spent on maintaining government ministries, covering subsidies and pensions. With the drastic fall of energy prices in 2014/2015, the outlook for Oman, whose state revenues depend for more than 70 percent on energy, worsened.[1406] The budget deficit skyrocketed to 15.95 percent of the GDP in 2015, 21.3 percent in 2016 and 12.8 percent in 2017, numbers that, in turn,

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[1404] Consider, for example, the attention dedicated to the issues by Times of Oman, Oman Observer, Muscat Daily.
[1405] These and other data on financial instruments to quell the unrests have been taken from Steffen Hertog, "The Cost of the Counter Revolution in the GCC", in *The Middle East Channel*, 31 May 2011
[1406] Lili Mottaghi. "MENA Quarterly Economic Brief: Plunging Oil Prices." Studies, *World Bank*, (2015).

plunged Oman's international credit agencies' ratings.[1407] International bodies, including the International Monetary Fund, have consistently asked the Omani government to cut back public spending, including by drastically reducing subsidies.[1408] While some benefits usually destined to public employees have been since eliminated and new taxes and fees, for example on telecommunications, have been introduced, the government tried to leave spending in education, health, housing and training relatively untouched. [1409] The decision to avoid sensitive spending cuts, and continue spending to create public sectors jobs, while creating further public debt, is related to the concerns of new protests.[1410] After hiring 50,000 young people in 2011, mainly in the bloated security forces, the government in 2017 has been promoting new plans to hire 25,000 more young Omanis.[1411] The government has also extended in scope its Omanization policies, first introduced in the 1980s, i.e. the labour policies aimed at pushing private sector companies to hire at least a minimum quota of Omani nationals in their workforce.[1412] In 2018, a six-month visa ban was issued for expat works across 87 industries, including media, engineering, marketing and sales, accounting and finance, internet technology, insurance, technicians, administration and human resources. The Ministry of Manpower has subsequently conducted inspections, strictly enforcing regulations which include monetary penalties and employers the risk of work permits suspension.

To spur diversification, which would positively impact job creation, investments are a key instrument. The government has focused its investment strategy on the northern Al Batinah region - where Sohar, epicentre of the protests, is located -

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[1407] Dominic Dudley, "Oman Told By IMF It Needs To Make 'Substantial' Reforms To Its Economy", *Forbes*, 19 April 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2018/04/19/oman-reform-economy-imf/#2302af013198 (accessed 29 May 2018)

[1408] Ibid.

[1409] "Finance Ministry Statement on State General Budget for 2016", *Oman News Agency*, 3 January 2016.

[1410] Interview of the author with an Omani economist, Muscat, 24 April 2018

[1411] "Omani government working to create 25,000 jobs in six months", *Reuters*, 25 January 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oman-jobs/omani-government-working-to-create-25000-jobs-in-six-months-idUSKBN1FE2TQ (accessed 29 May 2018)

[1412] Iram Ansari and Jacqueline McGlade. "Omanisation, Youth Employment and SME Firms in Oman." in David B. Jones and Sofiane Sahraoui (eds) *The Future of Labour Market Reform in the Gulf Region: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary, Evidence-Based and Practical Understanding.* (Berlin: Gerlach Press), 2018.

and on the region of Duqm.[1413] The major project in Sohar is the deep-sea port and related Free Zone, designed to attract foreign investment. However, larger projects are underway in Duqm, designated to become a major logistics hub.[1414] Foreign investors have been invited in Duqm, with China planning on investing a total of 10 billion USD as part of its One Bel One Road Initiative.[1415] Chinese capital is particularly significant as the troubled implementation of the JCPOA has created serious impediments to Iranian investments in the area, even those who had been previously agreed such as the $200 million project by Khodro Industrial Group, to build an automotive plant and the joint venture between Omani Al Anwar Holdings and Iranian Hormozgan Cement to establish a greenfield cement mill.[1416] The local population had shown a preference towards Iranian investments, concerned that Chinese investors would prefer to employ Chinese rather than local Omani staff.[1417] In addition, due to its remote geographic location, it is uncertain how the major government projects in Duqm would significantly contribute to job creation. Interestingly, in this context, other GCC countries have instead had a very limited role as investors in the Sultanate and the UAE, in particular, is considered to be *tout-court* hostile to the development of Duqm which might pose a challenge to the pre-eminence of Dubai as the logistics hub of the Gulf.[1418] The record on investments in the southern region of Dhofar is, instead, mixed: on one hand, there has been some investment in tourism yet, on the other hand, infrastructural investment is judged by an Omani

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[1413] Karen Young, "Oman's Investment and Reform Strategy: "Slow and Go"" *Arab Gulf State Institute in Washington*, 25 January 2018, https://agsiw.org/omans-investment-and-reform-strategy-slow-and-go/, (accessed 29 May 2018)

[1414] Ibid.

[1415] "Oman counts on Chinese billions to build desert boomtown" *Reuters*, 5 September 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oman-china-investment/oman-counts-on-chinese-billions-to-build-desert-boomtown-idUSKCN1BG1WJ (accessed 28 May 2018)

[1416] "Omani-Iranian JV to set up cement plant in Duqm", *Oman Daily Observer*, 5 May 2017, http://www.omanobserver.om/omani-iranian-jv-set-cement-plant-duqm/ (accessed 28 May 2018); "Oman fund, Iran's Khodro sign MoU for $200 mln auto venture", *Reuters*, 27 January 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-trade-autos-oman/update-1-oman-fund-irans-khodro-sign-mou-for-200-mln-auto-venture-idUSL8N15B2PP (accessed 28 May 2018)

[1417] Saleh Al Shaibany, "Chinese 'takeover' stokes unease in Oman port", *The National*, 28 February 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/chinese-takeover-stokes-unease-in-oman-port-1.708802 (accessed 28 May 2018)

[1418] Interviewees in Oman (April 2018) as well as in the UAE (March 2018) brought up this point.

researcher focusing on economic policy, too slow.[1419] The interviewee highlighted that significant infrastructural projects in Dhofar, such as the Nizwa – Salalah highroad and the cargo railway connecting the Salalah port to the north of the country, have been put on hold in 2016 and that, while the port of Salalah registered a growth in traffic and revenues in 2015-2017, such growth has been slow and the outcome of pre-existing initiatives, and, as previously detailed, the positive fallout of the Qatar crisis.[1420]

While longer-term plans take shape, overall youth unemployment in Oman has worsened, not improved, since 2011.[1421] Omani economists interviewed by the author have also expressed concerns regarding the level of economic inequality in the country, especially in the south, where they assess that economic inequality might be conducive to a new wave of political instability.[1422] A young Omani economist stated: 'The middle class is shrinking and the gap is now huge between simple people and business tycoons, who collude with politicians.'[1423] He finally highlighted that comprehensive reforms on economic liberalization would be needed to stabilise the country, alongside onerous and severe measures against corruption, but a number of factors have been blocking such decisions, including a lack of political will within the elites to take responsibility for the possible hardship generated by the reforms. The main priority remains to engineer any change gradually and with a tight grip on the possible implications for political stability: for this reason, the interviewee continued, there is a strong oversight by the Internal Security Services on the diversification programme, 'Tanfeedh'. His final conclusion was that while the Omani leadership, at the highest level, does perceive economic insecurity as a potential threat to political stability, a more urgent and pressing threat is considered to be emanating from political instability in the region.

[1419] Interview of the author with an Omani researcher specialised on economic policy and a government advisor, Muscat, 25 April 2018.
[1420] Ibid.
[1421] Cfr. "Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate)",
International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, data retrieved in November 2017, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS (accessed 28 May 2018)
[1422] Interview of the author with an Omani researcher at a market research firm, Muscat, 24 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani researcher specialised on economic policy and a government advisor, Muscat, 25 April 2018.
[1423] Interview of the author with a young Omani economic analyst, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

A small state in one of the world's most volatile region, for Oman the regional balance has always been a major foreign policy priority. However, in the post-Arab Spring era this matter has become, arguably, of greater urgency as the likelihood of a conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran increased.[1424] The two countries became involved in proxy confrontations on several theatres, from Lebanese and Iraqi politics to the battlefield of Syria and, to a certain extent, Yemen. In particular the Yemen war represents a major concern not only for possible spill-overs perturbing the security of southern Oman, but also because in the perceptions of Saudi Arabia the war brings the Iranian-Saudi confrontation directly at the Kingdom's borders, possibly triggering a further, even more direct, escalation.[1425] In this context, the Omani leadership additionally perceives a threat emanating from its immediate neighbours and GCC fellow states, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and the assertive course followed by the duo in the years 2015-2017 has been pointed out to be perceived as the main threat by several interviewees.[1426] In particular the ascension of Mohammad bin Salman to the royal palace of Saudi Arabia – in 2015 as Deputy Crown Prince and then, after June 2017, as Crown Prince – has given a new and unedited, exponentially more assertive, twist to the regional policy of Saudi Arabia. Mohammad bin Salman has also built a strategic alliance with the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammad bin Zayed, who is widely regarded with suspicion in Muscat.[1427]

The historical background for this lingering hostility between Oman and the UAE is substantial. Up until the mid-19th century, when the British Empire established its protectorates in the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultan had *de facto* authority over today's Emirates.[1428] Even after the division of the territories in two sovereign countries, the struggle over territorial sovereignty continued with decades-long

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[1424] Gause. "Beyond sectarianism".

[1425] Kamrava. *Troubled Waters,* p. 165*.*

[1426] Interview of the author with an Abu Dhabi –based expert on Oman, email, 20 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani analyst of strategic affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani professor of international relations, Muscat, 25 April 2018; Interview of the author with a former Middle East Adviser at the British Ministry of Defence London, 16 April 2019.

[1427] All the interviewees elaborating on the threat of regional instability in the perceptions of the Omani authorities, also made references to the aggressive intentions of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed.

[1428] Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, pp. 76-77.

open disputes and with occasional small-scale armed confrontations until as late as the year 2000.[1429] Oman did not open an Embassy in the UAE until 1987, and did not send an Ambassador until 1992.[1430] Amid this historical context, since Mohammad bin Zayed became the UAE's *de facto* leader in 2004, there was deterioration of the bilateral relations.[1431] At the end of 2010, Oman's state news agency reported that its 'security services uncovered a spying network belonging to the state security apparatus of the United Arab Emirates, targeting ... Oman and the way its government and military work' and that an undisclosed number of Omani nationals had been arrested, including some who worked for the government.[1432] Additionally, as mentioned, the narrative pushed by Omani authorities has been that the UAE tried to take advantage of the protests in Sohar in 2011 by supporting protesters. The UAE's participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, focusing on the southern region of al-Mahra, bordering Oman, is considered deeply problematic.[1433] As Emirati influence in al-Mahra grows, the Omani leadership evaluates the possibility that Abu Dhabi will attempt an infiltration strategy, similar to what they believe was orchestrated in Sohar, into the politically-sensitive region of Dhofar.[1434]

The crisis erupted in 2017 between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on one side and Qatar on the other side, brought the issue to a new level. The Omani leadership grew increasingly convinced that the true aim of the draconian measures taken against Qatar was to coerce Doha into aligning fully with the quartet's regional politics, renouncing its independent stances. A senior Omani official speaking to the press on condition of anonymity in December 2017 said that the dispute was not about Qatar's support for Islamists or Iran, but rather

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[1429] Fatma Al-Sayegh, "The UAE and Oman: Opportunities and Challenges in the Twenty-First Century", *Middle East Policy*, Volume IX, Number 3, Fall 2002
[1430] Ibid.
[1431] Interview of the author with an Abu Dhabi –based expert on Oman, email, 20 April 2018.
[1432] "Oman says uncovers UAE spy ring", *Reuters*, 30 January 2011 https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-oman-emirates-spying-idUKTRE70T13720110130 (accessed 29 May 2018)
[1433] Ramy Jabbour, "Yemen's Region of Al-Mahra at the intersection of Interests and Competitions", *Middle East Institute for Research and Strategic Studies*, 12 March 2018, http://meirss.org/yemens-region-al-mahra-intersection-interests-competitions/ (accessed 28 May 2018)
[1434] Interview of the author with an Omani analyst of strategic affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

about power and Saudi plans to dominate the Peninsula.[1435] As a GCC member which has consistently made foreign policy choices that diverge from those of Saudi Arabia, and as the Gulf monarchy closest to Iran, Oman might become a future target of the same pressure strategy, many in the leadership started to believe.[1436] Oman's socio-economic vulnerabilities, as previously exposed, create an imbalance of economic power between the Sultanate on one side and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other. The concern of becoming subject to overbearing pressure from these two neighbours is, according to an Omani journalist specialised on economic and financial affairs, the main reason why Oman has been reluctant to rely on their financial support as a relief for its embattled finances.[1437]

By applying this thesis' analytical framework, it is possible to describe the Omani leadership's perceptions of political instability in the neighbourhood and the region as a serious external threat damaging the Sultanate's international political interests, such as maintaining the regional balance, as well as its international economic and security interests, the free and safe circulation in the Strait of Hormuz and the potential spill-overs form the Yemen war. Such external threat, with a political and military dimension, is however looked at with additional concern because of the belief that it could evolve into an intermestic one. This is the context in which economic insecurity would acquire, in the regime's perceptions, a political dimension and morph into a full-fledged threat. In fact, the regime's response to the economic imbalances of the country indicate a degree of underestimation towards the possibility of a new wave of protests induced by economic inequality and socio-economic grievances. The Sultan's strategy of involving exponents of the different socio-political and tribal groups of the Sultanate in the management of economic power, thus giving them a stake into the regime's stability, appears to be considered an antidote against the consolidation of internal risks into threats. By contrast, Omani officials speaking in an international workshop on condition of anonymity have referred that the

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[1435] Quoted in: Joe Gill, "Saudi-UAE pact's aggressive policies could break up GCC: Oman source", *Middle East Eye*, 19 December 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-uae-reckless-policies-could-break-gcc-oman-source-435138828 (accessed 28 May 2018)
[1436] Interview of the author with an Omani analyst of strategic affairs, Doha, 28 April 2018; Interview of the author with an Omani professor of international relations, Muscat, 25 April 2018.
[1437] Interview of the author with an Omani journalist, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

Omani leadership worries regional powers might have a strategy to pressure the leadership itself from within the country, thus gaining political influence on Muscat, and that this scenario could unfold in conjunction with the looming succession of power at the highest seat in the country, that of the Sultan.[1438]

[1438] Interview of the author with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018; Remarks by the two Omani officials present at the workshop "Polarization in the MENA: what is the European role?" organised by the European Council on Foreign Relations on the side of the Doha Forum, Doha, 17 December 2018.

10.0 CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSIONS

10.1 The security agenda in the GCC monarchies after 2011.

The main research question that this study has addressed centred around how the interpretation of the notions of threat and security evolved after the Arab Spring at the level of each of the GCC countries. When studying these realms, the GCC is arguably one of the most relevant object of analysis in area studies. Indeed the notions of security and threat are so central to this region that they have been fundamental to the rationale of the GCC's establishment and existence, and the body itself was formed in the 1980s as a mechanism for collective defence against perceived common threats.[1439] Over the three decades of the GCC's existence, in spite of the recurrent skirmishes, the presence of a common perception and prioritization of threats among the six monarchies has rarely been questioned, even after the Arab Spring.[1440] In fact, most of the literature highlighted that, while at the regional level the GCC countries' response to the events of 2011 were markedly divergent, the Council's members closed ranks in a display of shared security priorities, to push back against change, when protests reached their own backyard.[1441] To investigate whether these long-held assumptions should be reconsidered, this thesis has looked in-depth at the period between the Arab Spring (2011) and the second intra-GCC crisis (2017).

The timeframe for analysis has been chosen primarily because the two intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017, which have been central to the case studies examined in this thesis, have provided a window into the traditionally opaque matters related to the GCC countries' perceptions of threats. Crucially, the two crises have represented unprecedented instances of intra-GCC divergences escalating into full-blown existential spats for the body.[1442] While efforts towards cooperation and even integration accelerated immediately after the Arab Spring reached the shores of the GCC, between 2011 and 2012, those appeared tactical rather than

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[1439] Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*.
[1440] Odinius and Kuntz. "The limits of authoritarian solidarity: The Gulf monarchies and preserving authoritarian rule during the Arab Spring."; Colombo. "The GCC and the Arab Spring: A Tale of Double Standards."
[1441] Ibid.
[1442] Bianco and Stansfield. "The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011."

strategic measures. Indeed, in March 2014, just a few months after the idea of a full Gulf Union floated by Saudi Arabia was finally rejected, the first substantial intra-GCC crisis begun, in a contradiction that is, once again, archetypical of the region's history, continuously oscillating between unity and division. The 2014 crisis saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar for eight months. The following crisis, erupted in 2017, featured a political boycott and the closure of land, sea and air borders around the Qatari peninsula. The gravest crises in the three decades of the Council's existence, these episodes revolved around the content of leaked official documents known as "Riyadh Agreements", whereby Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain - later joined by Egypt in a 'quartet' - accused Qatar of engaging in policies destabilising 'Gulf security' with reference to alleged connivance with the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadi organizations and Iran-supported Shi'a groups. As Qatar rebuked the accusations and challenged many of their basic assumptions, Kuwait and Oman declared their neutrality, implicitly refusing to fall in line with the quartet's perspective.[1443] These dynamics, it has been argued here, represented, among other things, a very public manifestation of divergences in the increasingly polarised and conflicting security thinking in the GCC region. Indeed, the crises have shattered long-standing assumptions on the GCC and 'Gulf security', i.e. that the members of this institution, especially when confronted by watershed external events, close ranks around shared threat perceptions. If, generally speaking, that had been the case in the 1960s and 1970s, during the wave of pan-Arab nationalism and socialism, and then with the Iranian revolution and its aftermath in the late 1970s and 1980s, and in the 1990s with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Arab Spring broke the trend.

A key consequence of the realizations about the drivers and consequences of the intra-GCC crises, has been that the sub-regional level of analysis is not sufficient to decode security perceptions in the GCC and the domestic level of analysis is necessary. Acknowledging both the steps taken towards increased integration in the past decades and the hurdles and setbacks in the timeframe studied, this research has treated the GCC as a coherent body in the Persian Gulf and the larger region. However, this research wanted to appreciate the many

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[1443] Ibid.

domestic specificities of individual countries, including differences in the macro-economic socio-economic indicators, in the socio-political cultures and systems. Over the years, these national specificities have been increasingly diverging rather than converging.[1444] The analysis carried out in this study has validated that trend, while proving that the popular uprisings of 2011 greatly impacted the security perceptions of the GCC monarchies. In particular, it was the unique experience that each of the monarchies individually had with the ripple effects of the Arab Spring at the domestic level and, most importantly, their specific perceptions of those events, that determined decisively the magnitude and nature of such impacts. In one example above all, as the one GCC country perceiving virtually no domestic repercussions from the 2011 uprisings, Qatar showed no intention to join the defensive or securitized positions of the other GCC monarchies in the years that followed. Oman and Kuwait, perceiving predominantly causes for dissent rather than insurgency, focused their response on containing identified root causes for the protests at the domestic level. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE instead, perceived the protests of 2011 as the result of an overlapping of domestic and international forces, whereby hostile external actors were at work to leverage grievances of marginalised, 'otherised' domestic communities. Investigating the factors informing these leadership perceptions, this thesis has found that the national chapters of the Arab Spring brought to the surface the different socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities of the individual countries which, interpreted by the political culture and filtered by the governing systems, accelerated the polarization of their security calculus, setting the monarchies on a collision course. With this in mind, the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises clearly show symptoms of a crack dating back to 2011 that have shattered the axiom of shared security perceptions in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf.

These divergences, against the backdrop of the long-standing issue of preserving sovereignty from neighbours, impinged significantly on GCC unity, superseded by state-centric considerations, even in the face of external threats. Hence, while treating the GCC as an intergovernmental organization whose members are kept together by historical, social, economic and political bonds, this study has given

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[1444] See for instance: Davidson. *Power and politics in the Persian Gulf monarchies*.

pre-eminence to their domestic levels. In addition, instead of looking at the GCC region as a secluded island, this research has seen the six GCC countries, individually, as members of the Persian Gulf geographic entity – formed also by Iraq, Iran and Yemen - and the Persian Gulf as a sub-complex in the larger security complex of the MENA region. It is hard to dispute that the Persian Gulf states are part of the larger MENA system, tied to it though the transnational identity of Islam, long-standing relations at the political level, centuries-long trade relations, a history of cultural exchanges and migrations.[1445] In fact, the security and political trends defining the post-2011 environment in the GCC have emerged, in the analysis, as strictly interdependent from the same trends taking foot in the wider MENA region. While this is entirely consistent with the long-standing findings of the area studies literature on the tight interrelation of the MENA region, this interdependency has deepened post-2011 for the GCC actors.[1446] With traditional key regional players from North Africa and the Levant weakened and destabilised by the uprisings and subsequent volatility, GCC actors have stepped up their regional postures to an unprecedented level of proactivity, to fill the vacuum from the perceived retrenchment of the traditional off-shore balancer, the United States, from the MENA region. As a consequence, they became further embroiled in regional affairs and trends.

As a matter of fact, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the entire MENA region witnessed both polarization and fragmentation, on several levels.[1447] Beyond the upsurge of sectarianism, fuelled by a power fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran, fault lines within the Sunni communities have become deeper, through a competition between a pro-Islamist and an anti-Islamist camp and the advancement of Sunni jihadist groups challenging the legitimacy of the Westphalian order, including vis-à-vis Islamic hereditary monarchies in the GCC. These trends, locking regional actors in a zero-sum game, were pivotal in the manifestation of further challenges - including civil wars, the empowerment of non-state actors, economic volatility and increased geopolitical confrontation between states - that rose significantly in the aftermath of 2011. In fact, notwithstanding the region's modern history has provided several instances of

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[1445] Lawson. *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World*; Al-Suweidi (ed.) *Arabian Gulf Security: Internal and External Challenges.*
[1446] Fawaz (ed.). *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World.*
[1447] Ibid.

treacherous conjunctures, seldom like after 2011 so many different challenges of different types have risen simultaneously on a regional and domestic scale. Hence, the timeframe considered in this thesis, between 2011 and 2017, has proven the most appropriate to examine how leaderships' security perceptions vary when exogenous and endogenous issues interact and overlap against the background of hyper-securitization. Subsequently, new questions emerged regarding the existence of a shared prioritization of threats and the interaction of endogenous and exogenous dangers when they materialize simultaneously, that don't seem to find answers in the existing body of scholarship.

Inscribing itself in in the modern area studies literature looking at the realm of security, in particular that dedicated to investigate the security calculus of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf since the formation of the GCC, this study has aimed to contribute to the scholarship with an exhaustive analysis of the increasingly complex political-security environment hitherto described. Existing studies, while they remain valid and applicable to the present, haven't so far provided a comprehensive analysis of the phase started in 2011 in the security thinking of each of the six GCC monarchies, especially in a single study. This thesis has largely built upon the literature on the politics of security in the GCC since the late 1980s, while widening theoretical perspectives and enhancing dynamism in terms of definitions. With the aim of spurring the academic debate on broadening the spectrum of available analytical tools in the study of threat perceptions and security calculus in the GCC region, this thesis has developed an original theoretical framework. The framework, applied to perform an analysis of threat perceptions in each of the six GCC states, has worked specifically on: providing a more nuanced definition of key concepts, which introduces a distinction between threats and risks, offering a categorization system for threat perceptions addressing the emergence of multidimensional, 'intermestic' threats, defining the structural and contingent factors that inform perceptions, and measuring how these impact the process of prioritization.

10.2 Rethinking threat analysis

The objects at the centre of this study, threat perceptions, can be elusive. One of the main challenges the author has encountered in this research has been to

differentiate between actual perceptions in the state leadership and state-orchestrated narratives on security threats through the securitization of non-threatening issues, instrumentally employed for political reasons.[1448] Indeed the area literature has recently pointed to the exploitation of security concerns on behalf of Gulf monarchs. Since the oil prices plummeted in 2014, GCC rulers have faced a time of scarcer resource revenues that are instrumental, in rentier economies, to distribute economic benefits that the population expects to receive from the state.[1449] Some scholars have advanced the argument that, given these constrains, regimes have chosen to transform security in a tool for accruing political support by hyper-securitizing non-threatening issues.[1450] By exaggerating the level of threats, and emphasizing their ability to guarantee security, Gulf regimes would thus reinforce domestic backing and guarantee political quiescence. This research has in fact found that, for instance, the 'Iran threat' is magnified in the public discourse of certain GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. At the same time, this is not entirely manufactured, in the sense that it genuinely features in the local security discourse and thinking at leadership level. This is similar to the perception of the Muslim Brotherhood and related Islamist movements in the UAE. Two considerations apply to the analysis of these idiosyncrasies. First, that the narratives themselves, even when inflated, inevitably influence perceptions. Secondly, that regimes' perceptions about their stability are routinely equated with security in the cognition of local leaders and, therefore, these are not necessarily dependent on objective considerations, i.e. on the threatening actors' capabilities or intent. Finally, this research has confirmed that the strategy of exaggerating the level of threats, while useful in the short term, is problematic in the longer term.[1451] Although heightening security concerns in a population, or rallying it against a common enemy, have long been considered effective political tactics to guarantee quiescence, the magnification of sectarian threats and the hyper-securitization of political dissent, on the long term, could deepen the socio-political cleavages that constitute the main socio-

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[1448] Here the term 'securitization' is used as described by Ole Waever in "Securitization and Desecuritization".

[1449] See for instance Gengler, "The Political Economy of Sectarianism in the Gulf."

[1450] See Andreas Krieg. "The Weaponization of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis." in Krieg (ed) *Divided Gulf*.

[1451] This is also argued in Malmvig. "Power, identity and securitization in Middle East: Regional order after the Arab uprisings."

political vulnerability of the GCC countries and increase the countries' exposure to threats.

In order to address the challenge of differentiating between threats and narratives about threats, the author has relied on an eclectic combination of sources in her methodology. Security perceptions have been deducted by the researcher through a combination of the analysis of these countries' foreign and domestic policies in a historical perspective, a speech analysis of their political and media discourse, and an extensive fieldwork conducted in the region, including to gather interviews from relevant interlocutors. While gathering interviews, the researcher has striven to access a diverse pool of sources, representing different perspectives, and has acknowledged the agenda and biases of the interviewees whenever appropriate. At the same time, given the focus of the thesis on local policy-makers' perceptions and perspectives, the researcher has chosen to interview mostly local sources or sources based in the region. This was particularly relevant to the research's authenticity, given that the data gathered has been subsequently analysed and systematised through the thesis' theoretical framework, which is instead also based on non-regional scholarship. This framework has contributed to the analysis in three main ways.

The first contribution has been in terms of the definition of the key concepts of security, as relevant to the context studied. This approach has confirmed, among other things, the conflation of 'regime security' with 'national security' in the regional policy-makers' perspective, as long established by the area literature.[1452] Security - as perceived by the GCC regimes - has hereby been defined to be about the ability of regimes to maintain their independent identity, their functional integrity and sovereignty against forces of change, which they see as hostile. This is a definition that assumes the basic primacy of political variables in determining the degree of security that states and regimes enjoy. Building on Barry Buzan's ideas about the comprehensiveness of the concept of security and his approach mixing, loosely, neorealism and constructivism, this thesis has embraced the idea of security as a matter of degree and theorised a differentiation between threats and risks. The term 'threat' has been thus employed specifically to define risks

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[1452] The conflation between regime and national security has been broadly explored, including in: Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism."; Bilgin. *Regional Security in the Middle East*.

that become acute enough to take on overtly political dimensions, i.e. dangers perceived as having intent and capability to hinder state boundaries, state institutions, regime stability or sovereignty.[1453] This distinction has proven particularly appropriate and useful in the hyper-securitised GCC region. Rejecting the uncritical and too frequent use of the term 'threat' to indicate dangers of various intensity, this research's use of the threat/risk distinction has allowed for a more nuanced description of how dangers are perceived in the different countries of the GCC region, and it has enabled the researcher to establish that, while there is a general agreement on which dangers have damaging potential for regimes' stability, dangers perceived as full-fledged threats in certain countries are viewed merely as risks by leaders of other GCC countries. Additionally, this analytical tool has also provided valuable information to enhance the understanding of the GCC countries' regional and international relations, given how those are based chiefly upon perceived needs of security and threat deterrence.[1454] Finally, this nuanced analytical approach paved the way for further findings on the process of prioritization, including as a crucial element to analyse and, to a certain extent, anticipate, policy actions.

Strictly related to the work on definitions has been the work on developing paradigms to systematize the security thinking, by categorizing pre-existing and emerging threats as they are perceived by policy-makers in the GCC. In another effort to provide a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of threat perceptions, this research has employed a system to categorise perceived threats in their dimensions and types. The five dimensions employed in this study are in line with those indicated by Buzan in the 1990s - political, military, economic, societal - depending on the threatened object.[1455] In addition, this research has attempted to go beyond the distinction between external and internal threats offered by the existing literature, by taking into account the increasing multi-dimensionality of threats and their intersections, particularly those emerging after 2011.[1456] Hence this thesis has spoken of three types of threats: external threats, or threats

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[1453] The main inspiration has been: Buzan, *People, states and fear*.
[1454] The link between foreign relations and security needs has been broadly explored, including in: Kamrava, *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*.
[1455] The main inspiration has been: Buzan, *People, states and fear*.
[1456] The external/internal distiction is the most common in the literature on regional security. See for instance: Koch and Long (eds.) *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century;* Al-Suweidi (ed.) *Arabian Gulf Security: Internal and External Challenges.*

originated from external sources that affect the international interests of the country; internal threats, or threats that have endogenous roots and affect the internal stability of the country; intermestic threats, or threats that have a mixed external and internal nature, such as those moved by exogenous motives but spreading internally and having domestic implications and, vice versa, those that have endogenous stimula but repercussions on the international sphere.[1457] This category has featured prominently in all six empirical chapters, as findings show how every GCC regime is concerned about intermestic risks or intermestic threats. This is a validation of the conclusions reached in the area studies literature with regards to borders' porosity in the MENA region, where trans-border political identities are strong and transnational links have historically been able to mobilize people across borders.[1458] However, it is interesting to highlight how the perceived threats are more often thought to originate in the Persian Gulf itself rather than from the wider MENA region, as was the case in the 1960s – 1990s. As far as the prioritization of threats is concerned, this thesis has found that intermestic threats are described in the leaderships' narratives as the most salient threats and given priority.[1459] Certainly, all potential dangers of domestic destabilization are treated as more serious and immediate than the classic power capabilities external menace. However, the research also found that intermestic threats can proliferate chiefly by leveraging pre-existing socio-economic and socio-political internal vulnerabilities, and these are not at all times acknowledged by the regimes, hence they don't necessarily inform their perceptions as key factors. At times GCC leaders ignore or exploit said vulnerabilities to perpetuate a *status quo* that preserves their hegemonic position as individual leaders in the short-term, despite weakening state stability in the long-term.

The final contribution of the thesis' framework has been to uncover the factors that more prominently inform the shaping of security perceptions.[1460] Systemic or

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[1457] The term intermestic has been employed only by a few scholars, including Victor Cha who defines intermestic issues as the 'interpenetration of foreign and domestic issues'. See: Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security", p. 23.

[1458] Regional interconnections are highlighted well in: Gause. *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*.

[1459] This is similar to what theorised by Gause in "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf."

[1460] This effort has relied on several studies on security perceptions, including: Jervis. *Perception and misperception in international politics;* Williams "(In) Security studies, reflexive modernization and the risk society."; Hogarth and Goldstein. *Judgment and*

historical socio-cultural factors, including the countries' socio-political identities as Arab-Islamic monarchies and tribal societies, maintain a crucial role. However, contingent factors such as events and actors, both the senders and receivers of threatening signals, also shape threat perceptions.[1461] Senders - i.e. the sources of the potential threat - are central to the formation of the threat image because they can represent the embodiment and personification of threats, and because they can be neutralised much more easily than it would be to neutralize the actual danger. Receivers - i.e. the threatened - are even more central, down to the analysis of their individual cognition and even emotions.[1462] These 'human factors', including personality, political cognition and socialization into their own cultural environment, have emerged as crucial in the GCC context, where all states are autocratic and leaders, who are seen as the final representatives of the national interest, face little to no constrains to act according to their own perceptions in foreign and security policies.[1463] This mechanism has been validated in all cases explored, with the partial exception of Kuwait, where the National Assembly has been able to have an impact on the leadership's threat perceptions and on foreign and security policies. In the other cases, with varying degrees of intensity, 'human factors' remain predominant, and it becomes key to identify who are the most influential individuals in each regime. It then falls onto them to acknowledge or ignore the role of structural vulnerabilities, when operationalising the threat images. Bearing in mind that this study describes vulnerabilities as conditions thought to determine the incapacity of the state to contain, cope with, adapt to and recover from a damaging phenomenon, the focus has been on on socio-political and socio-economic vulnerabilities, defining the former as an institutionalised low level of socio-political cohesiveness, determining a deficit of ruling legitimacy, and the latter as large inequalities, imbalances or failures in the national economy.[1464] This research has found that

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decision making: An interdisciplinary reader. Hermann and Hagan, "International Decision Making: Leadership Matters".

[1461] Eriksson and Noreen. "Setting the agenda of threats: An explanatory model."

[1462] Hogarth and Goldstein. *Judgment and decision making: An interdisciplinary reader*.

[1463] Gause. "Understanding the Gulf States."; Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam." in Krieg, (ed), *Divided Gulf.*

[1464] The definition of 'vulnerabilities' has been inspired by what Fabien Nathan writes in his article "Natural Disasters, Vulnerability and Human Security", in: Brauch at al. (eds.), *Facing Global Environmental Change.* However, with specific reference to the regional context studied, the researcher has relied on the literature on Third World Security for socio-political vulnerabilities (including Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament;* Azar and Moon. "Third world national security: Toward a new conceptual

while socio-economic vulnerabilities are by far more frequently leveraged in the narratives and discourses, socio-political vulnerabilities do not have a place in discourses and narratives and yet feature more prominently in the leaderships' perceptions. This especially emerged in the chapter dedicated to Saudi Arabia: while after 2014 socio-economic challenges have featured prominently in the state narratives, the country's much less talked about socio-political vulnerabilities – in terms of lack of cohesion, contested legitimacy and frail social contract – occupy a markedly stronger position in informing the leadership's perceptions on security. In addition, other vulnerabilities, such as the GCC countries' location in a geopolitically volatile and unstable context, especially given the fact that five out of six are small states, and the fragmented and underskilled status of their armed and security forces, feature strongly in the regimes' perceptions of external threats. However, the fact that these shortcomings of their armed forces is a known consequence of the conscious policy of 'coup-proofing', highlights how external threats, in most cases, have not retained the priority status.[1465]

10.3 The polarisation of the security agendas

In the six chapters of this study's empirical part, the perceptions of policy-makers in each of the six GCC countries regarding the issues at the centre of the Riyadh Agreements - Iran-aligned Shi'a proxies, the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated Islamist groups, jihadist organizations - have been measured and systematized through the thesis' theoretical framework. The aims has been to appreciate the nuances of those regimes' security perceptions, highlighting how and why some issues have been securitised into threats and others into risks, and which factors, including vulnerabilities, have played a role. Another objective has been to establish which issues have been perceived and treated as priority threats in each country in the period 2011-2017, why, and how they relate to those at the centre of the intra-GCC crises. In addition, the research has highlighted what

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framework.") and on the studies on the regional political economy for socio-economic vulnerabilities (especially; Held and Ulrichsen, (eds.) *The transformation of the Gulf: politics, economics and the global order*; Hertog. "The sociology of the Gulf rentier systems".)

[1465] The 'coup-proofing' policy is examined in: Hertog "Rentier militaries in the Gulf states".

challenges, despite their threatening potential, appear to be underestimated by the leadership.

As with regards to the issues at the centre of the intra-GCC crises, this research has shown that, while there is a general agreement on the fact that these actors can have damaging potential for regimes' stability in the region, each leadership in the region views these actors' differently with regards to their own stability and security.

This applied also to the signatories of the Riyadh Agreements - Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain - whose security thinking has shown divergences. While the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadi organizations and Iran-supported Shi'a groups were presented as absolute priority threats in the Riyadh Agreements and the subsequent public discourse from the top leadership in Riyadh, Manama and Abu Dhabi, actors within those countries have shown a much more nuanced perspective. The strongest convergence found has been between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, where Iran and its proxies are perceived and treated as priority threats, with a strong intermestic dimension. Iran is also perceived as a crucial danger in the UAE, where however the threat is perceived as an exogenous and external one, targeting the regional interests of the country. As a very small state, in Bahrain the domestic component of the 'Iranian threat' has been mitigated through repression especially after the disbanding of the Shi'a opposition party known as al-Wefaq in 2016, while the external dimension has gained more prominence afterwards. Indeed after 2014 Bahrain focused on strengthening relations with its external backers, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including at the risk of having to unconvincingly re-examine relations with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, perceived in Manama simply as a risk and part and parcel of its shrinking domestic loyalist base. Saudi Arabia underwent a similar process, albeit one resulting from indigenous security perceptions, after the ascension of Mohammad bin Salman to Riyadh's royal palace in 2015. In the Saudi case, Islamism was treated as an actual intermestic threat, as was jihadism – which is instead mostly perceived as a risk in the other GCC countries. In fact Saudi Arabia after 2015 has shown the most hyper-securitised approach among all cases studied, with a totalitarian attitude towards any potential political challenge to the royal family, including, for instance, tribalism. This speaks of strong underlying vulnerabilities weakening the state from within and creating

enabling conditions for exogenous dangers to develop an internal presence – or, in other words, of Saudi Arabia's ontological insecurity, i.e. the vulnerability of the Saudi state's identity. [1466] Matters of ontological insecurity and developing state-society relations not based on totalitarian tactics remain the most crucial questions for the long-term stability in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Similarly, the insufficient coherence and strength of the ideational foundations underpinning the nation-state are central in the security thinking of the UAE, too. However, leaders in Abu Dhabi are mostly focused on the repercussions and implications of socio-political vulnerabilities of the entire Westphalian system, highlighted by the 2011 uprisings, on the wider MENA region. As with it regards the internal coherence of the UAE's federal system, weakened by institutionalised intra-Emirates inequality, the possible implications seem to remain underestimated. The one threat connecting the local, federal and regional levels in the security perceptions of the Abu Dhabi leadership is Islamism, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and all affiliated movements. The only one of the Riyadh Agreements' issues that is perceived as a full-fledged intermestic threat in Abu Dhabi, interestingly Islamism is not viewed necessarily in the same way in other Emirates of the UAE federation. In the long term, and in the event of further escalation, these divergences of perceptions – both within the UAE and more widely within the anti-Qatar camp – albeit limited, might have significant impacts on policies.

Divergences with the anti-Qatar camp's perspectives on the substance of the intra-GCC crises are undoubtedly more substantial in Kuwait and Oman. The research has proven that, in both countries, viewed through the prism of this thesis' theoretical framework, Iran-backed Shi'a groups, the Muslim Brotherhood or jihadi organizations have not been perceived by the regimes as having the intent and capabilities to undermine their identity, stability and sovereignty or the functional integrity of the country's borders or institutions. To Kuwait and Oman the actors presented as threats in the Riyadh Agreements are better described as risks. In both countries, the local chapters of the Arab Spring have represented watershed moments in their security calculus. However, these have been regarded as endogenous phenomena, highlighting socio-economic vulnerabilities with socio-political implications, such as the perceived high level of

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[1466] Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity".

corruption in Kuwait and the rampant economic inequalities in Oman. The unique semi-democratic political system in Kuwait, in particular, seems to have had a role in mitigating the Kuwaiti leadership's security perceptions with regards to endogenous political risks. For both countries, the security priorities instead revolve around the possible escalation of regional instability. As two small states in one of the world's most volatile region, regional balance has always been a major foreign policy priority for both Kuwait and Oman. However, in the post-Arab Spring era this matter has become of greater urgency as the likelihood of regional conflicts increased. The difference between the two is that for Kuwaiti policy-makers, still affected by the memories of Iraq's 1990s invasion, active regional balancing also serves needs of internal equilibrium: with a diverse national fabric, and citizens hailing originally from all around the region, Kuwait has traditionally been exposed to reverberations of regional events, and related deepening of internal rifts and fault lines. In other words, the potential for external issues to morph into intermestic ones is regarded as substantial, with marginalised communities such that of *bidoons*, under strict observation. In Oman, instead, Sultan Qaboos' strategy of involving exponents of the different socio-political and tribal groups of the Sultanate in the management of economic power, thus giving them a stake into the regime's stability, appears to be considered an antidote against the consolidation of an internal dimension to exogenous dangers. This has apparently induced Oman to underestimate the threatening potential of socio-economic vulnerabilities, while political instability in the neighbourhood is prioritised as a serious external threat damaging the Sultanate's international political interests, such as maintaining the regional balance, as well as its international economic and security interests, the free and safe circulation in the Strait of Hormuz and the potential spill-overs form the Yemen war. Another flashpoint that is similarly crucial for both Kuwait and Oman is with regards to the succession of the two senior leaders, Sultan Qaboos and Emir Sabah. In particular this research has found that there is concern about the possibility that regional powers could try and exploit domestic royal factionalism to influence the leadership contest or leverage the temporary weakness of the countries to extend their own influence.

Indeed, one of the main findings of this research is that GCC countries increasingly started to look at one another as sources of salient threats to stability. In addition to the anti-Qatar camp opening hostilities against Qatar with this

motive, and Kuwait and Oman worried about how their sovereignty might be impinged in the regional conflictual environment, Qatar emerged as the country whose priority threat is represented by other GCC players, especially after 2014. In fact, the intra-GCC crises, and the initiatives pursued by the quartet countries, have been perceived in Doha as a substantial external threat, intended to become an intermestic one. The quartet countries, from Doha's perspective, targeted the regime's stability and identity, though an international campaign to de-legitimise the Qatari regime and proposing alternative candidates for the throne, as well as the functional integrity of the country's boundaries and its institutions, by sealing all land, sea and air borders with Qatar, and cutting all economic and financial relations. The fact that the Qatari population seemed to remain receptive to the leadership's message of unity at the most vulnerable moment in contemporary politics, was evidence that, similarly to what happened during the 2011 Arab uprisings, threats do not easily propagate from the regional to the domestic level in Qatar, where socio-economic and socio-political vulnerabilities are, largely speaking, contained. For the same reason, jihadi groups, Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran and its proxies are not perceived as threats in Qatar. A partial exception is represented by Iran, which does feature in the security calculus of the Qatari leadership, but as an external risk rather than a threat, and one mitigated after the 2017 intra-GCC crisis when Tehran extended some assistance to Doha.

Overall, what has emerged from this research is that GCC security is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but instead a complex matrix of domestic and regional factors each playing a distinctive role in formulating the definition, categorisation, perception and prioritisation of threats. While acknowledging substantial regional commonalities and bonds, the many domestic specificities of individual GCC countries - including the diversity of the national fabrics, historical factors, political systems, religious identities, individual leaders, macroeconomic indicators – play a crucial role in their security agendas. The comparative analysis of threat perceptions has validated a strong correlation between security dynamics and country-specific socio-economic and socio-political features. The discrepancies in these features are already wide and should they diverge, the risk is that regional countries might have increasingly more often contrasting opinions on what constitutes a priority to safeguard Gulf security, with implications for the very notion of it. It might be more functional, in light of these factors, to definitely

overcome the idea of the GCC region as a security community. However this research has also highlighted, once again, the interdependence of security in the region. This encourages to look at the region, in future analyses, through the approaches outlined in the theoretical paradigm of the regional security complex.

This interdependence and interconnectedness, while playing a pejorative role in the hyper-securitization of local politics, are arguably fuelled by global trends of globalization and internationalization which are insidious to contain or rewind. In fact, the GCC countries themselves have, in these same years, become increasingly more embedded in the international system as a globally strategic region. Noticeably, the GCC countries are home to approximately the 40% of world's proven crude oil reserves and 23% of proven natural gas reserves.[1467] These are key not only to the supplies of Europe but, particularly, to those of Asia, to the point that, according to International Energy Agency estimates, the stability of the global economy is and will remain dependent on a secure flow of oil from the GCC. [1468] The GCC countries also border the strategic waterways of the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, making the GCC a leading international trading hub. Hence the region, despite changing dynamics, will likely remain central to geopolitical and security calculations at a global level. Insulating themselves from global or regional trends, will thus become increasingly challenging for regimes in the GCC. Forcing this process may well have unintended and drastic consequences, to the point of inducing the *balkanisation* of the Persian Gulf.

[1467] US Energy Information Administration, *International energy statistics*, (proven reserves as of 2019) http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/IEDIndex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=57&aid=6
[1468] International Energy Agency, *Executive summary, World Energy Outlook*, Paris, 2012, p. 1, http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/publications/weo-2012/#d.en.26099

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

إنه في يوم السبت الموافق ١٩/١/ ١٤٣٥هـ فقد اجتمع خادم الحرمين الشريفين الملك عبدالله بن عبدالعزيز آل سعود ملك المملكة العربية السعودية ، وأخيه صاحب السمو الشيخ صباح الأحمد الجابر الصباح أمير دولة الكويت وأخيه صاحب السمو الشيخ تميم بن حمد بن خليفة آل ثاني أمير دولة قطر في الرياض .

وقد تم عقد مباحثات مستفيضة تم خلالها اجراء مراجعة شاملة لما ينبغي اتخاذه بين دول المجلس والخطوات التي تواجه أمنك واستقرارها، والسبل الكفيلة لازالة ما يعكر صفو العلاقات بينها .

وللأهمية تأسيس مرحلة جديدة في العمل الجماعي بين دول المجلس بما يكفل سيرها في إطار سياسة موحدة تقوم على الأسس التي تم تضمنها في النظام الأساسي لمجلس التعاون فقد تم الاتفاق على التي

١: ـ عدم التدخل في الشؤون الداخلية لأي من دول المجلس بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر وعدم المواد أو تجنيس أي من مواطني دول المجلس ممن ٢/ نشاط يتعارض مع أنظمة دولته إلا في حال طول موافقة دولته ، وعدم دعم الفئات المعارضة المعارضة للدول ، وعدم دعم الإعلام المعادي.

٢ ـ عدم دعم الدخول المسلحين أو أي من المنظمات أو التنظيمات أو الأفراد لمعين يهددون أمن واستقرار دول المجلس عبر تهديد العمل الرضي المباشر أو عبر تهديد محاولة التأثير السياسي .

٣ ـ عدم قيام أي من دول مجلس التعاون بتقديم الدعم لأي فئة كانت في اليمن من شأنه خطراً على الدول المجاورة لليمن . والله الموفق .))

صاحب السمو الشيخ صباح الأحمد
الجابر الصباح
أمير دولة الكويت

صاحب السمو الشيخ تميم بن حمد بن خليفة آل ثاني
أمير دولة قطر

عبد الله

سرى للغاية

آلية تنفيذ اتفاق الرياض

بعد اطلاع وزراء خارجية دول مجلس التعاون على الاتفاق الذي تم التوقيع عليه في الرياض بتاريخ ١٤٣٥/١/١٩ هـ الموافق ٢٠١٣/١١/٢٣م من قبل خادم الحرمين الشريفين الملك عبدالله بن عبدالعزيز ملك المملكة العربية السعودية ، وأخيه صاحب السمو الشيخ صباح الأحمد الجابر الصباح أمير دولة الكويت ، وأخيه صاحب السمو الشيخ تميم بن حمد بن خليفة آل ثاني أمير دولة قطر . وأطلع ووقع عليه كل من صاحب الجلالة الملك حمد بن عيسى آل خليفة ملك مملكة البحرين ، وصاحب الجلالة السلطان قابوس بن سعيد سلطان عمان وسمو الشيخ محمد بن زايد بن سلطان آل نهيان ولي عهد أبوظبي نائب القائد الأعلى للقوات المسلحة بدولة الامارات العربية المتحدة .

ونظراً لأهمية هذا الاتفاق الذي تم التوقيع عليه والذي لم يسبق وأن تم التوقيع على اتفاق مشابه له استشعاراً من القادة بأهمية مضمونه .

١

ثانياً ـ الجهة المناط بها اتخاذ القرار :

قادة دول مجلس التعاون :

يتخذ القادة ما يرونه مناسباً من إجراء حيال ما يتم رفعه لأنظارهم من وزراء الخارجية ضد الدولة التي لم تفي بما التزمت بما يتم الاتفاق عليه بين دول المجلس .

ثالثاً : الإجراءات المطلوب الالتزام بها :

يتم الالتزام بوضع هذا الاتفاق موضع التنفيذ وذلك من خلال الآتي :

١ ـ فيما يتعلق بالشؤون الداخلية لدول المجلس :

ـ الالتزام بعدم تناول شبكات القنوات الإعلامية المملوكة أو المدعومة بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر من قبل أي دولة عضو لمواضيع تسيء إلى أي دولة من دول مجلس التعاون، ويتم الاتفاق بين دول المجلس على تحديد قائمة بهذه الوسائل الإعلامية ويتم تحديثها دورياً.

ـ تلتزم كل دولة عضو بعدم منح مواطني دولة من دول المجلس جنسيتها لمن يثبت قيامهم بنشاط معارض لحكومة بلادهم، على أن تقوم كل دولة

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ولما كان الأمر يستدعي اتخاذ الإجراءات التنفيذية اللازمة لإنفاذ مقتضاه، فقد تم الاتفاق على ضرورة وضع آلية تضمن ذلك وفقاً للتالي :-

أولاً - الجهة المناط بها مراقبة تنفيذ الاتفاق :

وزراء خارجية دول مجلس التعاون :

يعقد وزراء الخارجية على هامش الاجتماعات الدورية السنوية للمجلس الوزاري اجتماعاً خاصاً يتم خلاله استعراض التجاوزات والشكاوي التي تردهم من أي من الدول الأعضاء ضد دولة أخرى عضو في مجلس التعاون . للنظر فيها ومن ثم رفعها للقادة . مع التأكيد على أن أول مهمة يقوم بها المجلس وفق الآلية المشار إليها هو التأكد من تنفيذ جميع ما تضمنه اتفاق الرياض المشار إليه أعلاه واعتبار محتواه اساساً لأمن واستقرار دول مجلس التعاون وتماسك دوله ، سواء المتعلقة بالشئون الداخلية ، أو الجوانب السياسية الخارجية أو الأمن الداخلي وعدم تجاوز التوجه الجماعي لدول المجلس والتنسيق مع الدول الأعضاء فيه ، وعدم دعم أي تيارات تمثل خطورة على دوله .

٢

بإيلاغ أسماء مواطنيها الذين يقومون بنشاط معارض لحكومتهم إلى الدولة الأخرى التي يتواجدون بها وذلك لمنع أنشطتهم المخالفة واتخاذ الإجراءات المناسبة بحقهم.
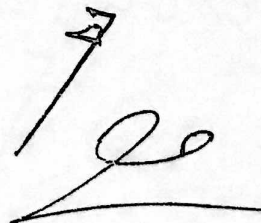
ـ اتخاذ الإجراءات اللازمة التي تضمن عدم التدخل في الشؤون الداخلية لأي دولة من دول المجلس وفي أي موضوع يمس الشأن الداخلي لتلك الدول، وعلى سبيل المثال لا الحصر ما يلي :

أـ عدم دعم الفئات المعارضة مادياً وإعلامياً من قبل مؤسسات رسمية أو مجتمعية أو أفراد ونشطاء.

بـ عدم ايواء أو استقبال أو تشجيع أو دعم أو جعل الدولة منطلقاً لأنشطة مواطني دول المجلس أو غيرهم الذين يثبت معارضتهم لأي من دول المجلس.

جـ منع المنظمات والتنظيمات والأحزاب الخارجية التي تستهدف دول مجلس التعاون وشعوبها من إيجاد موطئ قدم لها في الدولة وجعلها منطلقاً لأنشطتها المعادية لدول المجلس.

٤

د- عدم دعم أو إيواء من يقومون بأعمال مناهضة لأي من دول مجلس التعاون سواءً كانوا من المسؤولين الحاليين أو السابقين أو من غيرهم، وعدم تمكين هؤلاء الأشخاص من إيجاد موطئ قدم داخل الدولة أو المساس بأي دولة أخرى من دول المجلس.

هـ- إغلاق أي أكاديميات أو مؤسسات أو مراكز تسعى إلى تدريب وتأهيل الأفراد من دول مجلس التعاون للعمل ضد حكوماتهم.

٣ - فيما يتعلق بالأمن الداخلي لدول المجلس :

إن وجود ملفات أمنية معلقة تحتاج إلى إيضاح وذات ارتباط مباشر بالشأن الأمني لدى الأجهزة الأمنية المختصة في أي دولة من دول المجلس، يتطلب الدخول في تفاصيل تلك المواضيع وسبر أغوارها من خلال اجتماعات مباشرة فورية بين المختصين الأمنيين بشكل ثنائي مع نظرائهم.
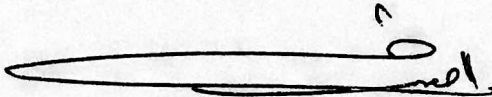
سري للغاية
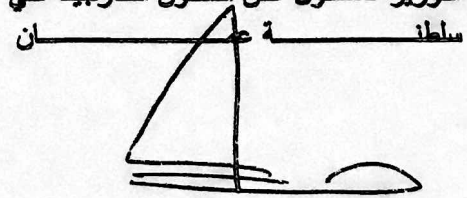
وفي حال عدم الالتزام بهذه الآلية فلبقية دول المجلس اتخاذ ما تراه مناسباً لحماية أمنها واستقرارها.

والله الموفق،،،
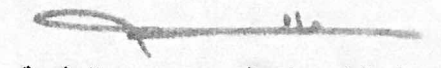
معالي الشيخ / خالد بن احمد بن محمد آل خليفة
وزير الخارجيــة في مملكــة البحريـن

سمو الشيخ / عبدالله بن زايــد آل نهيــان
وزير الخارجية بالإمارات العربية المتحدة

معالي / يوسف بن علــوي بن عبدالله
الوزير المسئول عن الشئون الخارجية في سلطنـــة عمـــان

صاحب السمو الملكي الأمير/ سعود الفيصل
وزير الخارجية في المملكة العربية السعودية

معالي الشيخ صباح الخالـد الحمـد الصبـاح
نائب رئيس مجلس الوزراء ووزير الخارجية بدولـــة الكويـــت

معالي الدكتور / خالـد بن محمـد العطيــة
وزير الخارجيــة في دولــة قطــر

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APPENDIX C: The Supplementary Agreement (2014)

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

" سري للغاية "
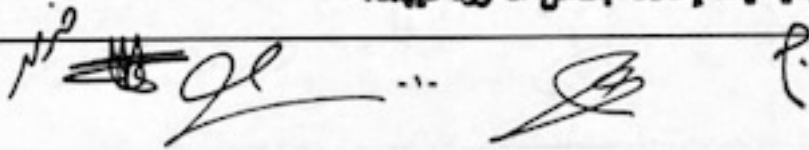
" اتفـاق الريـاض التكـميلي "

بناءً على دعوة كريمة من خادم الحرمين الشريفين الملك عبدالله بن عبدالعزيز آل سعود ملك المملكة العربية السعودية فقـد اجتمـع هـذا اليـوم الأحد ٢٣/١/١٤٣٦هـ الموافق ١٦/١١/٢٠١٤م في مدينة الريـاض لـدى خادم الحرمين الشريفين – حفظه الله – صاحب السمو الشيخ صباح الأحمـد الجابر الصباح أمير دولة الكويت، وصاحب الجلالة الملك حمد بـن عيسـى آل خليفة ملك مملكة البحرين، وصاحب السمو الشيخ تميم بن حمد بن خليفة آل ثاني أمير دولة قطر، وصاحب السـمو الـشيخ محمـد بـن راشـد آل مكتوم نائب رئيس دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة ورئيس مجلس الوزراء حاكم دبي، وصاحب السمو الشيخ محمد بن زايـد آل نهيـان ولي عهـد أبوظبي نائب القائد الأعلى للقوات المسلحة بدولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة، وذلـك لترسـيخ روح التعـاون الـصادق والتأكيـد علـى المـصير المـشترك وما يتطلع إليه أبناء دول مجلس التعاون لـدول الخلـيج العربيـة مـن لُحمـةٍ متينةٍ وتقاربٍ وثيق.

وبعد مناقشة الالتزامات المنبثقة عـن اتفـاق الريـاض الموقع بتـاريخ ١٩/١/١٤٣٥هـ الموافق ٢٣/١١/٢٠١٣م، وآليتـه التنفيذيـة، والاطـلاع علـى تقـارير لجنـة متابعـة تنفيـذ الآليـة ونتـائج غرفـة المتابعـة المـشتركة، واستعراض مـا خـرج بـه محـضر نتـائج غرفـة المتابعـة الموقـع بتـاريخ ١٠/١/١٤٣٦هـ الموافـق ٣/١١/٢٠١٤م مـن قبـل رؤسـاء الأجهـزة الاستخبارية في كل من (المملكة العربية السعودية، ودولة الإمارات العربيـة المتحدة، ومملكة البحرين، ودولة قطر).

فقد تم التوصل إلى الآتي،

أولاً، التأكيد على أن عدم الالتزام بأي بند من بنـود اتفـاق الريـاض وآليتـه التنفيذية يعد إخلالاً بكامل ما ورد فيهما.

ثانياً، أن ما توصل إليه رؤساء الأجهزة الاستخبارية في محضرهم المشار إليه أعلاه، يعد تقدماً لإنفاذ اتفاق الرياض وآليته التنفيذية، مع ضرورة الالتزام الكامل بتنفيذ جميع ما ورد فيهما في مدة لا تتجاوز شهر من تاريخ هذا الاتفاق.
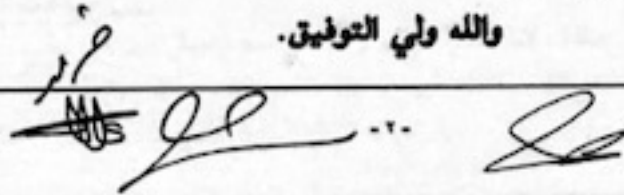
ثالثاً، عدم إيواء أو توظيف أو دعم - بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر - في الداخل أو الخارج أي شخص أو أي وسيلة إعلامية ممن له توجهات تسيء، إلى أي دولة من دول مجلس التعاون، وتلتزم كل دولة باتخاذ كافة الإجراءات النظامية والقانونية والقضائية بحق من يصدر عن هؤلاء أي تجاوز ضد أي دولة أخرى من دول مجلس التعاون لدول الخليج العربية، بما في ذلك محاكمته، وأن يتم الإعلان عن ذلك في وسائل الإعلام.

رابعاً، التزام كافة الدول بنهج سياسة مجلس التعاون لدول الخليج العربية لدعم جمهورية مصر العربية والإسهام في أمنها واستقرارها والمساهمة في دعمها اقتصادياً، وإيقاف كافة النشاطات الإعلامية الموجهة ضد جمهورية مصر العربية في جميع وسائل الإعلام بصفة مباشرة أو غير مباشرة بما في ذلك ما يبث من إساءات على قنوات الجزيرة وقناة مصر مباشر، والسعي لإيقاف ما ينشر من إساءات في الإعلام المصري.

وبناء على ما سبق، فقد تقرر أن مقتضى اتفاق الرياض، وآليته التنفيذية، وما ورد في هذا الاتفاق التكميلي، يتطلب الالتزام الكامل بتنفيذها. وقد كلف القادة رؤساء الأجهزة الاستخبارية بمتابعة إنفاذ ما تم التوصل إليه في هذا الاتفاق التكميلي، وأن يتم الرفع عن ذلك بشكل دوري للقادة لاتخاذ ما يرونه من التدابير والإجراءات المناسبة لحماية أمن دولهم واستقرارها.

كما تم الاتفاق على أن تنفيذ ما ذكر أعلاه من التزامات يصب في وحدة دول المجلس ومصالحها ومستقبل شعوبها، ويعد إيذاناً بفتح صفحة جديدة ستكون بإذن الله مرتكزاً قوياً لدفع مسيرة العمل المشترك والانطلاق بها نحو كيان خليجي قوي ومتماسك.

والله ولي التوفيق.

صاحب السمو الشيخ محمد بن راشد آل مكتوم   صاحب السمو الشيخ محمد بن زايد آل نهيان
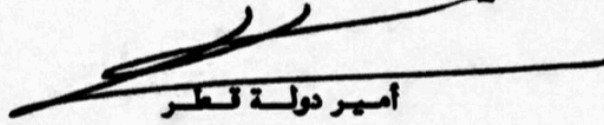
نائب رئيس دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة   ولي عهد أبوظبي نائب القائد الأعلى للقوات المسلحة
ورئيس مجلس الوزراء حاكم دبي   بدولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

صاحب الجلالة الملك حمد بن عيسى آل خليفة
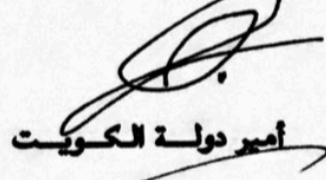
ملك مملكة البحرين

صاحب السمو الشيخ تميم بن حمد بن خليفة آل ثاني
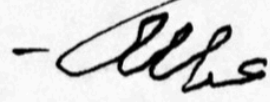
أمير دولة قطر

صاحب السمو الشيخ صباح الأحمد الجابر الصباح

أمير دولة الكويت

خادم الحرمين الشريفين
الملك عبدالله بن عبدالعزيز آل سعود

ملك المملكة العربية السعودية

APPENDIX D: The blacklists issued by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt in 2017

The June 2017 list.

Entities:

1. Qatar Volunteer Center - Qatar

2. Doha Apple Company (Internet and Technology Support Company) - Qatar

3. Qatar Charity - Qatar

4. Sheikh Eid al-Thani Charity Foundation (Eid Charity) - Qatar

5. Sheikh Thani Bin Abdullah Foundation for Humanitarian Services - Qatar

6. Saraya Defend Benghazi - Libya

7. Saraya al-Ashtar - Bahrain

8. February 14 Coalition - Bahrain

9. The Resistance Brigades - Bahrain

10. Hezbollah al-Bahraini - Bahrain

11. Saraya al-Mukhtar - Bahrain

12. Harakat Ahrar Bahrain - Bahrain

Individuals:

1. Khalifa Mohammed Turki al-Subaie

2. Abdelmalek Mohammed Yousef Abdel Salam

3. Ashraf Mohammed Yusuf Othman Abdel Salam

4. Ibrahim Eissa Al-Hajji Mohammed Al-Baker

5. Abdulaziz bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

6. Salem Hassan Khalifa Rashid al-Kuwari

7. Abdullah Ghanem Muslim al-Khawar

8. Saad bin Saad Mohammed al-Kaabi

9. Abdullatif bin Abdullah al-Kuwari

10. Mohammed Saeed Bin Helwan al-Sakhtari

11. Abdul Rahman bin Omair al-Nuaimi

12. Abdul Wahab Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Hmeikani

13. Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Rabban

14. Abdullah Bin Khalid al-Thani

15. Abdul Rahim Ahmad al-Haram

16. Hajjaj bin Fahad Hajjaj Mohammed al-Ajmi

17. Mubarak Mohammed al-Ajji

18. Jaber bin Nasser al-Marri

19. Yusuf Abdullah al-Qaradawi

20. Mohammed Jassim al-Sulaiti

21. Ali bin Abdullah al-Suwaidi

22. Hashem Saleh Abdullah al-Awadhi

23. Ali Mohammed Mohammed al-Salabi

24. Abdelhakim Belhadj

25. Mahdi Harati

26. Ismail Muhammad Mohammed al-Salabi

27. Al-Sadiq Abdulrahman Ali al-Ghuraini

28. Hamad Abdullah Al-Futtais al-Marri

29. Mohamed Ahmed Shawky Islambouli

30. Tariq Abdelmagoud Ibrahim al-Zomor

31. Mohamed Abdelmaksoud Mohamed Afifi

32. Mohamed el-Saghir Abdel Rahim Mohamed

33. Wajdi Abdelhamid Mohamed Ghoneim

34. Hassan Ahmed Hassan Mohammed Al Dokki Al Houti

35. Hakem al-Humaidi al-Mutairi

36. Abdullah Mohammed Sulaiman al-Moheiseni

37. Hamed Abdullah Ahmed al-Ali

38. Ayman Ahmed Abdel Ghani Hassanein

39. Assem Abdel-Maged Mohamed Madi

40. Yahya Aqil Salman Aqeel

41. Mohamed Hamada el-Sayed Ibrahim

42. Abdel Rahman Mohamed Shokry Abdel Rahman

43. Hussein Mohamed Reza Ibrahim Youssef

44. Ahmed Abdelhafif Mahmoud Abdelhady

45. Muslim Fouad Tafran

46. Ayman Mahmoud Sadeq Rifat

47. Mohamed Saad Abdel-Naim Ahmed

48. Mohamed Saad Abdel Muttalib Abdo Al-Razaki

49. Ahmed Fouad Ahmed Gad Beltagy

50. Ahmed Ragab Ragab Soliman

51. Karim Mohamed Mohamed Abdel Aziz

52. Ali Zaki Mohammed Ali

53. Naji Ibrahim Ezzouli

54. Shehata Fathi Hafez Mohammed Suleiman

55. Muhammad Muharram Fahmi Abu Zeid

56. Amr Abdel Nasser Abdelhak Abdel-Barry

57. Ali Hassan Ibrahim Abdel-Zaher

58. Murtada Majeed al-Sindi

59. Ahmed Al-Hassan al-Daski

The July 2017 list

Entities:

1. Al Balagh Charitable Foundation, Yemen.

2. Al Ihsan Charitable Society, Yemen.

3. Rahma Charitable Organisation, Yemen.

4. Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Libya.

5. Al Saraya Media Centre, Libya.

6. Boshra News Agency , Libya.

7. Rafallah Sahati Brigade, Libya.

8. Nabaa TV, Libya.

9. Tanasuh Foundation for Dawa, Culture and Media, Libya.

 Individuals:

1. Khalid Saeed Al Bounein.

2. Shaqer Jummah Al Shahwani.

3. Saleh bin Ahmed Al Ghanim.

4. Hamid Hamad Hamid Al Ali.

5. Abdullah Mohammed Al Yazidi.

6. Ahmed Ali Ahmed Baraoud.

7. Mohammed Bakr Al Dabaa.

8. Al Saadi Abdullah Ibrahim Bukhazem.

9. Ahmed Abd Al Jaleel Al Hasnawi.

The November 2017 list.

Entities

1. The International Islamic Council "Massaa'".

2. World Union of Muslim Scholars.

Individuals

1. Khaled Nazem Diab

2. Salem Jaber Omar Ali Sultan Fathallah Jaber

3. Moyasar Ali Musa Abdullah Jubouri

4. Mohammed Ali Saeed Atm

5. Hassan Ali Mohammed Juma Sultan

6. Mohammed Suleiman Haidar Mohammed Al-Haydar

7. Mohammed Jamal Ahmed Hishmat Abdul Hamid

8. Alsayed Mahmoud Ezzat Ibrahim Eissa

9. Yahya Alsayed Ibrahim Mohamed Moussa

10. Qadri Mohamed Fahmy Mahmoud Al-Sheikh

11. Alaa Ali Ali Mohammed Al-Samahi

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