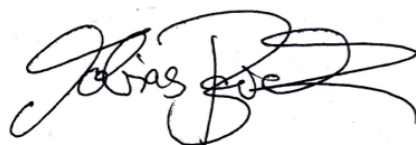


Stability from Disorder in the Middle East: Comparing the Perspectives of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar

Submitted by Tobias Borck to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Middle East Politics in May 2021

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.



Signature:

Abstract

The 2010s were a decade of transformation and conflict in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Throughout, most global and regional powers declared stability to be one of their main objectives in the region. This included Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, the three Arab states with the most ambitious and influential regional policies during the decade. Yet, observation of these policies suggests that instead of serving as a common denominator, the seemingly shared objective of stability obscured the differences between their competing agendas.

Without a universally accepted definition of stability, the thesis develops an original analytical framework. It holds that states understand stability as a condition in their strategic environment, emerging from systems of order, that they consider favourable; and that their conceptions of this order derive from their perceptions of themselves and of what constitutes and drives instability. Drawing on qualitative data, the thesis analyses and compares Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar's perceptions of political developments in the MENA during the 2010s, and their conceptions of what constituted stability.

The thesis finds that the three Gulf monarchies concurred that the region descended into unprecedented and dangerous instability following the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings. Yet, their assessments of what characterised and drove this instability diverged. This led them to formulate different — and, in some areas, contradictory — views of how the politics in and between regional states had to be organised, and what role external powers could play, in order to yield stability.

The thesis concludes that examining states' conceptions of stability provides a useful lens to understand their foreign policy behaviour. It further establishes that the joint declaratory commitments to stability, often evoked by European and North American governments to frame relations with partners in the region, are insufficient as a basis for strategic alignments.

Acknowledgments

This thesis has been a long time coming. I started to work on it in January 2015, but at least my parents know that it has been in the works for much longer than just the past seven years. In that time, I have spent long hours staring at a screen, reading and writing (and deleting) many words, and learning a lot about working by, and for, myself. But this thesis would not exist were it not for dozens of other people and their support, guidance, knowledge and company. I want to take this opportunity to say thank you.

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List of Abbreviations

AQ - Al-Qaeda

Daesh - the Arab acronym for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

EU - European Union

G20 - Group of Twenty

GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

IMCTC - Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition

IMF - International Monetary Fund

IRGC - Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

JCPOA - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

LNG - Liquefied Natural Gas

MB - Muslim Brotherhood

MENA - Middle East and North Africa

MESA - Middle East Strategic Alliance

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

OIC - Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

UAE - United Arab Emirates

UK - United Kingdom

UN - United Nations

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

UNGA - United Nations General Assembly

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

USA - United States of America

VUCA - Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity

Transliteration and Names

For transliterated Arabic words and names, the thesis generally uses the English spelling familiar from major English-language international news outlets, including the BBC, the New York Times, or Reuters. For words or names prefaced with the Arabic definite article, the thesis capitalises the 'A' and connects the prefix to the noun with a hyphen (i.e. Al-Qaeda or Al-Jazeera).

Many of the individuals most frequently cited throughout this thesis are members of the Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari royal families and therefore share last names. To ease the reading process, the thesis states their full name when they first appear in the text and subsequently refers to them by their first and middle names (which generally indicate lineage). For example, Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani is referred to only as Tamim bin Hamad through most of the thesis. The only exceptions are cases in which individuals are generally referred to differently in major international news outlets (e.g. Saudi diplomat Turki Al-Faisal, rather than Turki bin Faisal).

1. Introduction

Stability as a Divisive Objective

Stability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was the declared objective of many regional countries and various global powers with interests in the region throughout the 2010s. As the MENA entered a period of instability, disorder, and transformation, particularly in the wake of the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11, leaders from around the world persistently spoke of their intention to restore, maintain and/or build stability.

US President Barack Obama told an audience in Jerusalem in 2013 that America and Israel “share a commitment to security for our citizens and the stability of the Middle East and North Africa;”¹ his successor, Donald Trump, urged America’s partners in the region to work with Washington “to advance security and stability across the Middle East and beyond.”² The European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, affirmed in 2020 that European countries would seek “to contribute to increase the stability and peace in the region.”³ Russia agreed — according to Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, “we all want stability to be secured.”⁴ Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani explained that his country’s defence capabilities, “including our missiles, are solely defensive deterrents for the maintenance of regional peace and stability;”⁵ and at the 2017 UN General Assembly, Turkish President Recep

¹ Barack Obama, “Transcript: Obama’s Speech in Israel,” *The New York Times*, 21 March 2013, Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/world/middleeast/transcript-of-obamas-speech-in-israel.html?pagewanted=all> [accessed 15 January 2021].

² Donald J. Trump, “President Trump’s Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit,” *Trump White House*, 21 May 2017, available at: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/president-trump-delivers-remarks-arab-islamic-american-summit/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_content=wh_20170521_20170521_FOR_potus-abroad_twitter_vision [accessed 15 January 2021].

³ Josep Borrell, “Closing statement by Josep Borrell Fontelles, Vice-President of the European Commission, on the EU Response in Line with International Law about the US Middle East Plan: Extract from the Plenary Session of the EP,” *European Commission*, 11 February 2020, available at: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/l-184214> [accessed 15 January 2021].

⁴ Sergey Lavrov, “Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Speech at 49th Munich Security Conference,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 2 February 2013, available at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/A9CB4318DB0A5C8444257B0A00376FE8 [accessed 15 January 2021].

⁵ Hassan Rouhani, “Statement by H.E. Dr. Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 20 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/iran-islamic-republic> [accessed 15 January 2021].

Tayyip Erdogan said that “we all should work on building tranquility, peace, security, and stability in the region instead of sparking new conflicts.”⁶

The governments of Arab states, including those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, also consistently proclaimed their commitment to stability. In 2015, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud called for “strict rules that guarantee the region’s security and stability.”⁷ Meanwhile, the UAE’s Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan vowed that his country would “spare no effort in helping Arab nations to live in peace and stability,”⁸ and Qatar’s Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani pledged “not to spare any effort in participating effectively in the joint Arab action to realise the security, stability and sustainable development of our peoples.”⁹

Yet, in terms of these countries’ actual foreign policies in the MENA during the 2010s, this seemingly shared objective of stability hardly produced unity — not among global and regional powers, and not even amongst the Gulf monarchies. Quite the opposite: The term stability, rather than serving as a common denominator, appeared to obscure differences between often competing and fundamentally opposing regional agendas. This is the subject of this thesis. It focuses on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, the three Arab states with the most active, ambitious and influential regional foreign policies during the decade. It compares and contrasts their respective perspectives on what stability — and the disorder and instability they purportedly sought to overcome — in the MENA meant to them.

1. 1. The Research Questions

The notion that stability in the MENA might mean different things to different people is not new. In 1957, the long-time editor of *The Middle East Journal*, William Sands, wrote that “unless we have in mind the same general order of

⁶ Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “Statement by His Excellency, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of the Republic of Turkey,” (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 19 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/turkey> [accessed 15 January 2021].

⁷ Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Speech of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” (speech, 15th GCC Consultative Meeting, Riyadh, 5 June 2015), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/ArabLeague/Pages/ArticleID2013327151518658.aspx> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁸ Mohammed bin Zayed A-Nahyan, “Speech of Mohamed bin Zayed,” (speech, 39th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification, Abu Dhabi, 4 May 2015), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=15 [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁹ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 28th Arab League Summit, Amman, 29 March 2017), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

things as the peoples of the Middle East have in mind when we say ‘stability,’ we can not very well hold a meaningful conversation with them on these matters.”¹⁰ Covering the perspectives of all the “peoples” of the region Sands referred to would exceed what can be achieved within the space available in this thesis. For reasons that are further explained in the next section, it therefore concentrates on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, and specifically the views of their governments.

The thesis’ initial research question is therefore: **What were Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s conceptions of stability in the MENA, and how did they compare?** During the early stages of the research, it became clear that the differences between the three states’ views of stability were tied to diverging interpretations of developments taking place in the region. In Egypt in 2013, for example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the Egyptian military in seizing power, because they had regarded the reign of the previous government in Cairo, led by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and President Mohammed Morsi, as threatening to destabilise Egypt and the wider region. Meanwhile, Qatar, which had maintained good relations with the Morsi government, saw its overthrow as upending stability. Consequently, the thesis other research question, which has to be answered together with, and ultimately before examination of the three countries’ conceptions of stability is: **How did Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar perceive the strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s, and how did these perceptions compare?**

The decision to compare the perspectives of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar with each other, rather than with those of the USA or European countries is purposeful. The thesis takes inspiration from Malcolm Kerr, who introduces his *The Arab Cold War* about regional politics in the 1950s and 60s with the declaration: “One of my main concerns in the book has been to dispel the notion of Arab politics as a projection of decisions made in Washington, London, Moscow and Jerusalem. [...] Even the most influential foreigners are peripheral to the Arabs’ own conceptions of their world and their visions of its future.”¹¹ The thesis is clearly the work of a European researcher and, as noted below, as one of its secondary objectives seeks to contribute to debates about European

¹⁰ William Sands, “Requirements for Middle Eastern Political Stability,” *Social Science* 32, no. 4 (1957), 201.

¹¹ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), vi.

countries' engagement with the MENA. However, not least to avoid any semblance of an effort to assess whether Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perspectives on stability in the region were any more or less correct than those of European governments, the thesis is entirely devoted to the study of the former. The role of western or other external powers is only considered in so far as they mattered to these three countries' perceptions of the strategic environment in the MENA and their agendas for stability in the region.

1. 2. Rationale and Argument

The rationale for this thesis rests on a set of three core assumptions. These build on one another and are drawn from both the contemporary academic literature on the MENA's international relations, as well as wider policy debates and media reporting about the region.

The first assumption is that with the beginning of the 21st century, the MENA entered a new period of instability, disorder and transformation, which appears likely to last for decades to come.¹² According to the literature, this period is characterised by popularly driven demands for socio-economic and political change, most obviously manifested in the Arab Uprisings of 2010/11; inter- and intra-state conflicts (including the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the post-2011 wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen); and intense competition for regional influence between external (e.g. the USA and Russia) and, especially, regional powers (including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, as well as Turkey and Iran, for example). Various scholars describe the international relations aspect of this period as a 'New Middle Eastern Cold War,' adapting Kerr's above mentioned concept of the 'Arab Cold War' half a century earlier.¹³

The second assumption is that instability and disorder in the MENA continue to directly impact the strategic and security interests of countries around the world,

¹² See for example: Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (London, Hurst & Company, 2015); Marc Lynch, ed., *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson, eds., *Shifting Sands: The Unraveling of the Old Order in the Middle East* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2015); Gareth Stansfield, "The Remaking of Syria, Iraq and the Wider Middle East: The End of the Sykes-Picot State System?" *RUSI Briefing Paper* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2013); Richard Youngs, "Living with the Middle East's Old-New Security Paradigm," in *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Ana Echagüe (Madrid: FRIDE, 2013), 15-24, 15.

¹³ See for example: Gregory Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014); Curtis R. Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 42 (2012); Michael Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux," in *Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism*, ed. Thanassis Cambanis (New York: The Century Foundation, 2017); Morten Valbjorn and Andre Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011): 3-24.

including in Europe and North America. Even as the transition away from fossil fuels is underway, the region remains central to global energy markets; and there are growing trade and investment ties between states in the region (especially the wealthy Gulf monarchies) and economies around the world.¹⁴ Moreover, conflicts in the region, and particularly the proliferation of extremist groups with international agendas, and the flow of refugees and migrants from and through the MENA, affect security calculations in Berlin, London, Paris or Washington.¹⁵ At the same time, however, following the experiences of the Iraq War and the aftermath of the 2011 intervention in Libya, there is a strong sense that the USA and European countries' ability — and willingness to try — to impose solutions to the region's crises is inherently limited. There is little disagreement that the USA, first and foremost, and several European states will remain powerful contributors to regional security (maintaining an extensive military basing infrastructure in the Gulf, for example, or leading the international coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria since 2014). Ultimately, however, there is a consensus that the region's challenges have to be overcome — and stability (re)built — in cooperation with, and ideally under the ownership of, regional states.¹⁶ In this context, successive US administrations and European governments have particularly looked to their Arab partners in the Gulf — and especially to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar — to take on this responsibility.¹⁷ From the perspective of Washington and European capitals, the relationships with the Gulf monarchies may be marred by significant differences with regards to values (e.g. democratic political freedoms or human rights), but are generally portrayed as based on shared strategic interests. The British

¹⁴ See for example: Mehran Kamrava, ed., *International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Gulf Goes Global: The Evolving Role of the Gulf Countries in the Middle East and North Africa and Beyond," *FRIDE Working Paper* 121 (2013).

¹⁵ See for example the British government's published National Security Strategy: Her Majesty's Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (London: The Stationery Office, 2015).

¹⁶ See for example: Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2020, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>. [accessed 10 June 2020]; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Making Foreign Policy in the Midst of Turbulence," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds., Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 339-35; Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the US Role," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015), 18-27; Robert Malley, "The Unwanted Wars: Why the Middle East Is More Combustible Than Ever," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2019), 38-46; Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2015), 2-10.

¹⁷ See for example: Daniel Byman, "Beyond Counterterrorism: Washington Needs a Real Middle East Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2015), 11-18; Saul Kelly and Gareth Stansfield, "A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf," *RUSI Briefing Paper* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2013); Richard Youngs, "The European Union: Inclusion as Geopolitics," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, in Kristina Kausch (Madrid, FRIDE, 2015), 115-128.

government, for example, has declared its intention to expand cooperation with the Gulf states, including “developing collective approaches to regional issues to advance [...] shared interest in stability and prosperity.”¹⁸

Concurrently, and this is the third assumption, in the first two decades of the 21st century, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar emerged as the most ambitious and influential Arab states in the region. As the traditional centres of Arab politics — Egypt, Syria and Iraq — became consumed by political and economic crises and conflict, the governments in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha are widely seen as pursuing the most consequential regional foreign policies, certainly during the 2010s.¹⁹ Several authors, including Abdulla²⁰ (in Arabic) and Gaub²¹ (in English), have termed this “the Gulf Moment” in the MENA’s international relations. The activist turn in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s regional foreign policies is generally explained as the result of two main factors: Their ambitions and desires to seize opportunities to increase their regional influence; and their shared perception that the MENA’s erstwhile security guarantor, the USA (and its European partners), was retrenching from the region, just as the Arab Uprisings signalled substantial changes in the regional order, creating a vacuum they could either seek fill or cede to others, including Iran, Turkey and various non-state actors.²² In this process, the three Gulf monarchies cooperated in some areas, but also engaged in fierce competition, pursuing different interests and proclaiming different visions for the region’s future.²³

¹⁸ Her Majesty’s Government, “Gulf Co-operation Council – United Kingdom, first summit 6 to 7 December 2016, Kingdom of Bahrain: Joint Communiqué,” 7 December 2016, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gulf-co-operation-council-united-kingdom-first-summit-joint-communication/gulf-co-operation-council-united-kingdom-first-summit-6-to-7-december-2016-kingdom-of-bahrain-joint-communication> [accessed 15 January 2021].

¹⁹ For example: Raymond A. Hinnebusch, ed., *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the MENA* (New York, Public Affairs, 2016); Curtis R. Ryan, “Inter-Arab Relations and the Regional System,” in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 110-124.

²⁰ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment in Contemporary Arab History* [لحظة الخليج في التاريخ العربي المعاصر] (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2018).

²¹ Florence Gaub, *The Gulf Moment: Arab Relations since 2011* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015).

²² For example: Matteo Legrenzi and Gregory Gause, “The International Politics of the Gulf,” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 304-323; Nawaf Obaid, “Saudi Arabia Shifts to More Activist Foreign Policy Doctrine,” *Al-Monitor*, 17 October 2013, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2013/10/saudi-shifts-foreign-policy-doctrine.html#> [accessed 15 January 2021]; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Small States with Big Roles: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring,” *HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series* 3 (2012); Karen E. Young, “The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC,” *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 2 (2013).

²³ For example: Andreas Krieg, ed., *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*; Stephens, “The Arab Cold War Redux”; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020).

From the three assumptions the thesis draws the rationale behind the above outlined research questions: If the USA and European countries' policies towards the MENA are to be predicated on working with their Arab — especially Gulf — partners, they must be based on as thorough an analysis as possible of these states' own perceptions of developments in the region and views on which (and how) challenges should be addressed.

Over the course of the analysis in the following chapters, the thesis forms the following argument: Building on a review of the relevant international relations literature — both general and specific to the MENA — the thesis establishes that, in abstract terms, states tend to understand stability as a condition of the strategic environment that they regard as favourable. They essentially use the term as shorthand to describe a “general order of things,”²⁴ as Sands puts it, in which their national security and strategic interests are protected and exposed only to manageable threats. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar generally agreed that the MENA descended into unprecedented disorder and instability in the wake of the Arab Uprisings. Yet, their assessments about the drivers behind this process, how they made sense of what happened in the region over throughout the 2010s, and how they saw their own — and each other's — roles therein, differed, subtly in some areas, fundamentally in others. Similarly, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha concurred that stability in the MENA required substantial change at multiple levels — including with regard to the involvement of external powers in the region, the organisation of the regional order, and the socio-economic and political systems of order of individual Arab states. However, building on their diverging perceptions of the strategic environment, their conceptions of stability described three different versions of the region's future. In fact, in several areas, what Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, respectively, regarded as conducive to stability, was seen as deeply destabilising by one or two of the others. There was significant alignment between the views of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, certainly more than either of them shared with Qatar, but they were nevertheless far from homogenous and are therefore best analysed individually.

²⁴ Sands, “Requirements,” 201.

1. 3. Objectives and Methods

By examining, and comparing and contrasting Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's foreign policies in the MENA, and specifically their respective conceptions of stability in the region, the thesis aims to make contributions in three main areas:

First and foremost, the thesis seeks to improve understanding of the MENA's international relations and add to the academic literature devoted to the study of regional states' foreign policies, particularly those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. This field has grown in recent years, but there remains ample space for new contributions. As Kerr²⁵ posits, and as Dessouki and Korany,²⁶ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch,²⁷ and Nonneman²⁸ — all editors of volumes this thesis leans on — argue, there is a need for research dedicated to studying the foreign policies of regional states based on their own unique perspectives, rather than through the lens of their relationships with external powers.

Second, the thesis seeks to make a contribution to the theoretical and practical understanding of stability in the MENA as an objective of foreign policy in the 21st century. In the literature, the term stability is defined to widely varying degrees of precision and detail, often meaning very different things. Meanwhile, as the regional order appears to be in flux, multiple regional and external powers were seeking to influence outcomes while all professing their commitment to (re)building stability. Selecting three of these powers as its subject, and examining them through an original framework for analysing stability as a foreign political objective, the thesis offers in-depth case studies showing three different perspectives on the meaning behind this notion.

Third, the thesis seeks to support the public debate surrounding the formation of US and European foreign policies towards the MENA, especially with regard to the declared objective of partnering with the three states under examination. In the process, it challenges the assumption that references to a loosely defined shared interest in stability can serve as a basis for sound policy-making.

²⁵ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

²⁶ Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008).

²⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014).

²⁸ Gerd Nonneman, ed., *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005).

The thesis applies a qualitative research methodology, rooted in a specifically developed analytical framework, based on the study of publicly available primary and secondary data sources, and supported by interviews. The next chapter explains and justifies these methods in greater detail, and outlines the thesis' scope and structure.

2. Scope, Structure and Methods

The thesis asks deliberately wide-ranging research questions. It seeks to establish Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of their regional environment and their conceptions of stability in the MENA and throughout the ten-year period following the Arab Uprisings. These questions could be tackled in many ways; this chapter details the approach adopted in this thesis. It explains the limits (with regard to timeframe, geography and content) set to define the scope of the analysis; it summarises the rationale behind the specially developed analytical framework that provides theoretical grounding and structure for the thesis' comparative analysis; and it outlines the main sources and methods of data collection. The chapter concludes with a brief breakdown of the thesis' thirteen chapters.

Throughout, the chapter discusses the choices made by the author to navigate several methodological issues encountered during the research and analysis process. The arguably most profound challenge arising in any study of MENA states' foreign policies is tied to one of the foundational assumptions in the Middle East Studies field: Strategy and decision-making, particularly on foreign, defence and security policy, is generally seen as taking place in a proverbial black box, the exclusive domain of very small circles of ruling elites that tends to be inaccessible for outsiders.¹ However, this must not deter researchers. Insisting on direct access to the most senior decision-makers would be to set unreasonably high standards; and dismissing attempts at understanding the thinking behind the foreign policies of MENA states as too difficult cannot be an option either. Other governments seeking to interact with regional countries cannot afford this, and neither can academia. The thesis therefore follows examples set by other scholars: It acknowledges the 'black box' problem caveating many of its findings, but builds a robust research methodology and analytical approach, outlined in the following pages, that nevertheless allows for valid and relevant conclusions.

¹ See for example: Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008); Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014); Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Karen E. Young, "Foreign Policy Analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Breaking Black Boxes and Explaining New Interventions," *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers* 1 (2015): 4-12.

The notion that MENA states' foreign policies are determined by political elites has implications for the language used in this thesis: Wherever the thesis posits that Saudi Arabia, the UAE or Qatar — or their capitals, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Doha — do, think or want something, it understands the countries' governments, led by their most senior decision-makers, as the principal actors, without inferring that their populations necessarily share or support their beliefs or actions.

2. 1. Analytical Scope: Setting Limits

The subject of this thesis, as defined by the research questions, is intentionally expansive. Rather than examining Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's handling of a specific issue — the war in Syria, for example, or Egypt's post-2011 political developments — the thesis aims to establish a general understanding of the three countries' foreign policies and approaches to the notion of regional stability. Yet, even at the level of these 30,000-foot perspectives, it is necessary to delineate the scope of the research and analysis, and to acknowledge that alternative choices could conceivably lead to different conclusions.

2. 1. 1. Timeframe: The 2010s

The thesis focuses on the decade of the 2010s, beginning with the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings² and concluding with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. These dates are somewhat arbitrary, and the thesis takes into account the region's historical context and developments predating 2010, as well as some events that have occurred between early 2020 and its submission (e.g. the Abraham Accords and the official conclusion of the Gulf Crisis in January 2021). Nevertheless, they are chosen for a reason.

The Arab Uprisings were a watershed moment in the MENA's regional affairs and have been identified as such both in the academic literature, and by representatives of the three countries under examination in this thesis — according to Anwar Gargash, Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs until 2021, since the Arab Uprisings, “a region that has been used to three crises at

² The term 'Arab Uprisings' (as well the term 'Arab Spring') is the subject of much academic debate. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage in, much less settle, this debate. The thesis uses the term to describe the popular protests and anti-government uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and over the course of 2011 led to regime change, periods of political transition and/or the outbreak of civil wars in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, and to government crackdowns and/or reform programmes in many other Arab countries.

one time, is now undergoing six, seven crises at the same time.”³ Ehteshami lists the Uprisings as one of the “catalytic events”⁴ that have shaped the region’s strategic environment; Lynch sees them as the critical juncture in the emergence of what he calls “the new Arab wars.”⁵ These authors and many others in the field also acknowledge the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 as key moments for the region, but ultimately see the Uprisings as “the most important force in reshaping the region”⁶ since the end of the Cold War.⁷ Moreover, scholars such as Abdulla⁸ and Gaub⁹ identify the Uprisings as precipitating the crystallisation of “the Gulf moment” in the MENA’s affairs, in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar — the three countries studied in this thesis — stand out as the Arab states with the most ambitious and influential foreign policies in the region.

The endpoint for the analysis is more difficult to determine. Initially, the author considered the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis in June 2017 an appropriate marker. Ulrichsen¹⁰ and others¹¹ explain it as the culmination of a long-standing rift between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on one side, and Doha on the other, that had deepened significantly in the wake of the Arab Uprisings. However, while the thesis contributes to explaining the crisis’ roots, its objective is more general in nature (as explained in the introductory chapter). Furthermore, the differences

³ Anwar Gargash, “In Conversation with Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash,” interview by Sunjoy Joshi and Harsh Pant, *ORF*, 21 March 2018, available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/conversation-dr-anwar-mohammed-gargash-cabinet-minister-minister-state-foreign-affairs-uae-strategic-relations-india-uae-crisis-middle-east/> [accessed 15 March 2019].

⁴ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “Making Foreign Policy in the Midst of Turbulence,” in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds., Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 339-35.

⁵ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the MENA* (New York, Public Affairs, 2016)

⁶ Ehteshami, “Making Foreign Policy.”

⁷ In addition to the authors cited throughout this paragraph, see also: Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015); Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Fawaz Gerges, *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012); Marc Lynch, ed., *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ed., *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Robert Worth, *A Rage for Order: The MENA in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

⁸ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment in Contemporary Arab History* [لحظة الخليج في التاريخ العربي المعاصر] (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2018).

⁹ Florence Gaub, *The Gulf Moment: Arab Relations since 2011* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020).

¹¹ For example: Dina Esfandiary and Ariane M. Tabatabai, “The Roots of the Regional Spat with Qatar,” *Foreign Affairs*, 6 June 2017, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-06-06/gulf-widens>. [accessed 14 February 2019]; Andreas Krieg, ed., *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); David B. Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring,” *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017), 544-562.

in the three states' respective perceptions of the regional environment and conceptions of stability have arguably become more apparent since 2017 — Saudi, Emirati and Qatari representatives have appeared increasingly eager to articulate their countries' positions, seeking to garner international understanding and support. The Covid-19 pandemic, meanwhile, serves as a suitable cut-off point for the thesis precisely because it transcends the regional context. Although still ongoing at the time of writing, it appears likely that it will come to be seen as an event that shapes any scholarship of international relations, including those of the MENA, for the foreseeable future.¹² The pandemic does not invalidate the dynamics that characterised Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's foreign policy prior to the pandemic, illustrated by the fact that their regional activities have not come to a sudden halt in 2020. But it raises a new set of questions that can reasonably be considered as beyond the scope of what this thesis can cover.

2. 1. 2. Geography: The Middle East and North Africa

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's foreign policies have a global outlook. After all, they are world-leading producers of hydrocarbons, the geographic centre of Islam (Saudi Arabia), and international logistics and travel hubs (UAE and Qatar). However, this thesis' geographic focus is narrower, examining only their regional foreign policies. The analysis concentrates on Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha's views, positions and activities pertaining to developments in the countries belonging to the MENA region — understood in this thesis as consisting of the members of the Arab League, and Israel, Iran and Turkey.¹³

The analysis extends Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's views regarding external powers' approaches to the region as these feature heavily in how they perceived regional developments during the 2010s and thought about stability in the MENA. This is explained in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, which develop the thesis' analytical framework. Even within the MENA, the thesis devotes more attention Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha's views regarding some countries — e.g.

¹² Various assessments of the pandemic's impact on international affairs, and the MENA in particular, have already been published; for a selection see: David Gordon et al., "The Strategic and Geo-Economic Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic," *IISS Manama Dialogue 2020 Special Publications* (London/Manama: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020); Daniel Susskind et al., "Life Post-Covid-19," *Finance & Development* 57, no. 2 (2020), 26-29; United Nations, "The Impact of Covid-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity to Build Back Better," *Policy Brief* (New York: United Nations, 2020).

¹³ This definition of the MENA is in line with those of many of the major works about the region's international relations cited throughout the thesis.

Egypt, Iran, Turkey — than others (Algeria, Mauritania or Morocco feature less prominently). This reflects the priorities of the three states, but also results from the authors' decision to concentrate on issues in the region that most clearly illustrate various analytical arguments and conclusions. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's respective handling of post-2011 developments in Egypt, for example, more clearly revealed their positions on regional matters than their engagements with the political situation in Algeria during the decade.

On some occasions, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's regional foreign policies played out beyond the confines of the MENA or intersected with their activities in other regions. This was arguably most apparent in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region that includes both Arab and non-Arab states (e.g. Ethiopia, Eritrea), and which emerged as a major area of competition between the three states.¹⁴ Towards the late 2010s, the Gulf states were also at least tangentially involved in increasing geopolitical tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which included both European and MENA states.¹⁵ However, while these developments informed the research, and are referenced at various points throughout the analysis, examining them in detail would require more substantial reviews of the respective regional contexts, which would exceed the space available in this thesis.

2. 1. 3. Content: Lined Dimensions

As already mentioned in the previous section, even with within the above outlined limitations of the thesis' temporal and geographic scope, the analysis of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's foreign policies in the MENA still requires prioritisation amongst the many different dimensions and aspects of regional affairs that could conceivably be considered. The thesis' research questions require answers that are, to an extent, generalising in nature. The objective is to offer conclusions about the three states' conceptions of stability in the MENA, as a whole, rather than their specific views about stability in Egypt, Syria or Libya, for example, or the prospects of integrating Iran into a regional order. Each of these subjects, and the many others that make the MENA's regional

¹⁴ See for example: International Crisis Group, "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," *Middle East Report* 206 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019).

¹⁵ See for example: Cinzia Bianco, "Gulf Monarchies and the Eastern Mediterranean: Growing Ambitions," in *Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines*, ed. ECFR (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern_med/gcc. [accessed 10 January 2021].

affairs a rich field of study, undoubtedly merits its own thesis-length treatment. Together, they constitute the building blocks the thesis' arguments build on, but in the available space, they can only be discussed in limited detail. The analysis therefore relies on, and is informed by, the work of countless other scholars and numerous in-depth interviews, many of which can only be referenced in the footnotes and bibliography.

Besides the above noted decision to concentrate on developments that most obviously illustrate Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's views, the choices of which subject areas feature more prominently than others are based on two other factors. First, the analysis follows the direction set in the sources it examines; the public communications of the Saudi, Emirati and Qatari governments, for example, are more expansive with regard to some matters than to others. Second, the thesis' analytical framework (outlined in the next section and explained in detail in Chapters 3 and 4) defines the parameters of what is taken into account and what is not.

2. 2. The Analytical Framework: Developing Structure

The thesis uses an original analytical framework to provide structure for the three case studies and facilitate comparison between them, while also anchoring the thesis in the existing literature. The framework is developed and explained in detail in Chapters 3 and 4; the following sections offer brief summaries of its two main components: its theoretical elements related to foreign policymaking, and the terms of order and stability; and the inspirations it draws from the Middle East Studies literature.

2. 2. 1. Theoretical Elements: Order and Stability in Foreign Policy

The analytical framework follows the well-established consensus in the literature that no single theoretical paradigm is sufficient to understand the MENA's international relations. It builds on approaches to the study of MENA states' foreign policies developed by Dessouki and Korany,¹⁶ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch,¹⁷ and Nonneman,¹⁸ all of which combine realist, constructivist and

¹⁶ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*.

¹⁷ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

¹⁸ Gerd Nonneman, ed., *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005).

various other International Relations theories. Furthermore, the framework is rooted in the theoretical notion that states conduct foreign policy in, and in order to shape and influence, a strategic environment that is constantly evolving and characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Consequently, states' perceptions of this environment (their understanding of cause-effect relationship, decisive developments etc.) are inevitably subjective and are likely to differ from those of others.¹⁹

The framework draws on literature beyond the Middle East Studies field to define the terms order and stability. Order, whether at the international, regional or state level, is understood as a cumulative term to describe the system of dynamics within a defined entity. This can include the organisation of political, economic and social interactions between a system's component parts (e.g. between states in a region, or between a state's government and population); and it can be institutionalised, codified, normative, or seemingly unstructured.²⁰ The term stability, meanwhile, is usually used as though its meaning is universally understood, but no such singular definition appears to exist. The framework therefore develops a working definition, drawing on a wide range of sources in the political science and international relations literature,²¹ and tying it directly to the concept of order. It concludes that stability can be used as a descriptor (often in the form of its derived adjective 'stable') to indicate the likely endurance of a given order, or as a product emerging from a particular system of order. In the latter case, which is of particular relevance for the thesis' research question, it is commonly used in conjunction with, or even as a synonym of, positive attributes such as security and peace. Consequently, an order — even if stable — can also produce instability, which is generally associated with insecurity and war.

¹⁹ This is also in line with core tenets of strategic theory: Decisions are made in an environment of imperfect information emerging from complexity and other factors. See for example: Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2006).

²⁰ This is drawn from works such as: Mohammed Ayoob, "From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 53, no 3, (1999), 247-260; Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2011); Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997).

²¹ For example: Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*; Keith M. Dowding and Richard Kimber "The Meaning and Use of 'Political Stability'," *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983), 229-243; Leon Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability," *Comparative Politics* 5, no 3 (1973), 449-463; Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

These theoretical foundations yield the framework's abstract understanding of stability as an objective of foreign policy: States see stability as a positive condition in their strategic environment that is favourable to their security and other interests. To achieve stability, they seek to maintain or change aspects of the environment's system of order; and their actions are based on their unique and subjective understanding of the dynamics shaping this environment. It follows that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar can have very different perceptions of the developments that occurred in the MENA during the 2010s, and hold equally different conceptions of what stability in the region looked like.

2. 2. 2. Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States: External, Regional, State

As noted, the analytical framework builds on approaches to studying the foreign policies of MENA states developed by Dessouki and Korany,²² Ehteshami and Hinnebusch,²³ and Nonneman,²⁴ all of which coming multiple theoretical influences and diverse sets of variables. Other works the thesis draws on also proceed in this manner.²⁵ The thesis shares their foundational assumption that regime security tends to be the central objective of MENA states' foreign policies, as decision-makers see their own survival in power as synonymous with national security. This is particularly relevant for the three monarchies the thesis concentrates on: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's development as states — and, consequently, their international relations — are inextricably tied to the interests of their respective royal families. As they seek to protect themselves and pursue their interests, they engage with domestic and international constituencies (including foreign allies and foes, and domestic supporters and opponents) and deal with all manner of threats physical and ideational, military and socio-economic and political.

The framework captures the idiosyncratic element of policy-making in MENA states by following Dessouki and Korany's example, rooting the examination of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's conceptions of stability in the MENA in an

²² Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*.

²³ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

²⁴ Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*.

²⁵ For example: Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Gregory F. Gause, ed., *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

understanding of how each “state’s foreign policy elite perceives the world and their country’s role in it.”²⁶ The first part of each case study (Chapters 6, 8, 10) therefore examines how Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha made sense of developments in the MENA during the 2010s and how this intersected with their self-perceptions. Moreover, the framework borrows from Nonneman, who divides the factors influencing foreign policy-making in the region into three tiers: domestic, regional and international. Deviating slightly from Nonneman’s approach, the framework (and specifically the sections examining the three states’ conceptions of stability in Chapters 7, 9 and 11) uses the domestic tier primarily to focus on Saudi, Emirati and Qatari views about stability at the level of other Arab states, rather than the domestic variables shaping their own decision-making. Nevertheless, as is demonstrated throughout the analysis, the three monarchies’ respective domestic environments served as their initial frame of reference for how they thought about state-level stability.

In sum, the analytical framework provides the theoretical foundation for the thesis, and the necessary structure for the systematic study (case-by-case and in comparison) of inevitably complex sets of variables. It sets three sub-headlines for each of the thesis’ two research questions: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s perceptions of their the strategic environment in the MENA are explored by analysing their respective big-picture narratives of developments in the region during the 2010s, their assessments of the main drivers of instability and disorder, and their views of themselves and their roles in the region. Their conceptions of stability in the MENA are analysed by focusing on their views about the role they wanted external powers to play in the region, how they wanted the regional order to be organised, and what they saw as the most important components of stability at the level of individual Arab states.

2. 3. Sources: Collecting Qualitative Data

Within the structure of the analytical framework, the thesis’ research questions are answered by analysing three main sources of qualitative data: government communications, interviews, and secondary literature, including media

²⁶ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, 39.

reporting. The following section explains the rationale behind the selection of each source, and outlines how the research was conducted.²⁷

2. 3. 1. Government Communications: In Their Own Words

For each of the three case studies, the author has examined foreign policy-related public statements by government representatives. This includes major speeches to international, regional or domestic audiences (e.g. delivered at the UN General Assembly, Arab League or GCC summits, and on national holidays or other key occasions); relevant publications on government websites; public appearances of government officials at international conferences other public events; and long-form interviews with government officials or op-eds in their name published in national or international media outlets. Due to the thesis expansive geographic and temporal (as noted above, it focuses on the countries' approaches to the whole region and throughout the 2010s), the author has primarily selected statements that are relatively long and contain detailed descriptions and explanations of regional affairs. Short statements about specific issues, for example during press conferences, or social media posts such as Tweets were reviewed where appropriate, but not included in the main sample for analysis.

The statements come from a homogenous, self-selecting group that constitutes the elite of foreign-policy decision-makers from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, and were collected through a purposive (and iterative) sampling process.²⁸ Building on an extensive review of the secondary literature, the author identified a core group of individuals from each of the three countries that included both senior foreign-policy decision makers (i.e. their monarchs, crown princes and other senior members of their royal families) and officials who most frequently appeared in public to convey their governments' views (e.g. ministers, ambassadors etc.). For the Saudi and Qatari case studies, this has also included former government officials who could reasonably be regarded as having intimate knowledge of their governments' positions, including veteran

²⁷ The research design has primarily involved an iterative process with decisions about sources and sample selection etc. influenced by continuous engagement with the secondary literature. Throughout, the author has drawn inspiration and guidance from: Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2008); Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis, eds., *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (London: Sage, 2003).

²⁸ See: Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, and Gillian Elam, "Designing and Selecting Samples," in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, eds. Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (London: Sage, 2003), 77-108.

Saudi diplomat Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud or Qatar's former Prime- and Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani. For the Emirati case study, a significant number of statements by Youssef Al-Otaiba, Ambassador to the USA, and Omar Saif Ghobash, who has held various positions throughout the decade,²⁹ were included. Both have arguably acted as spokesmen for their government with a remit far exceeding that of traditional Ambassadors.³⁰ The statements were primarily found through searches on government websites, Google, YouTube, and NexisLexis; in some instances, statements were also discovered through references in the secondary literature. The author ensured that statements were each year of the study's timeframe were selected. All examined statements were in English or Arabic; where no Arabic-to-English translations were provided (by the respective Foreign Ministries, Embassies, or event hosts), they were translated by the author.

In total, the thesis has examined 80-100 statements for each case study. Ritchie, Lewis and Elam note that in qualitative studies the determination of sample sizes should be guided by the concept of saturation, "a point of diminishing return where increasing the sample size no longer contributes new evidence."³¹ They further explain that while samples sizes for qualitative studies typically do not exceed 50, establishing the point of saturation can vary on a case-by-case basis and also depends on an author's assessment of their requirements. In the case of this thesis, the author concluded that saturation was reached after the examination of 80-100 statements. While most major insights that informed the analysis were derived from a smaller number of statements, they were corroborated and contextualised by others. Many statements are referenced in footnotes throughout the case study chapters; frequently, they are grouped together to provide the reader with multiple sources for a specific conclusion. All examined statements are listed in the bibliography.

The rationale behind examining publicly available government communications is to ground the thesis' analysis in the narratives the three states themselves put forward to explain how they experienced developments in the region and how

²⁹ Ambassador to Russia (2009-2017), Ambassador to France (2017-2018), and Assistant Minister for Culture and Public Diplomacy (2019-).

³⁰ Al-Otaiba has played a role in the UAE's engagement with Israel, for example, and Ghobash has spoken at events around the world, including to promote his book *Letters to a Young Muslim*.

³¹ Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, "Designing and Selecting Samples," 83.

they thought about stability. It is important to note that these narratives are likely to be consciously constructed and tailored to an audience, rather than necessarily being a true reflection of the respective speakers' views. This is particularly relevant because many of the examined speeches, interviews and op-eds occurred in front of international, often American and European audiences, or were published in American or European media outlets. However, apart from variations in emphasis or scope, the content of these examples did not differ fundamentally from those explicitly directed at domestic audiences (e.g. National Day speeches etc.). Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that Saudi, Emirati and Qatari government representatives were aware that in the 21st century information environment statements they make abroad, whether in Arabic or English, are also accessible to their domestic audiences (and vice-versa); on many occasions they are reported on in the national media. Finally, dismissing Saudi, Emirati and Qatari statements, particularly those delivered in international settings, as merely intended to appeal to international — especially western — audiences, risks belittling the three countries as having no independent agency. As the analysis in the following chapter shows, representatives from all three states frequently stressed the differences between their views and those of their western partners. They ritually emphasised their commitment to counter-terrorism, a particular area of US and European interest, but they were also generally forthcoming in their criticism of western countries' foreign policies towards the MENA.

Nevertheless, recognising that publicly communicated narratives are liable to contain a significant degree of spin, regardless of the intended audience, the thesis' analyses them together with, and in the context of, other data sources, namely interviews and secondary literature.

2. 3. 2. Interviews: Individual Perspectives

The author has conducted 100 one-on-one interviews for this thesis; 23 with nationals from either Saudi Arabia, the UAE or Qatar, and 77 with nationals of other countries. The number of interviews was determined by the author's assessment of when a saturation point was reached, as well as by what was feasible with the means at the author's disposal.³² The interviews included

³² For a detailed discussion regarding sample size see the above cited Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, "Designing and Selecting Samples," as well as: Mark Mason, "Sample Size and Saturation in Phd Studies Using Qualitative Interviews," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* 11, no. 3 (2010).

seven with Saudi nationals (three current or former government officials, four subject matter experts); eight with Emiratis (one former government official, seven subject matter experts); and eight with Qataris (five current or former government officials, three subject matter experts). Of the 77 interviews with other nationals, 15 were conducted with senior current or former US, UK and German government officials with personal experience of engaging directly with the most senior levels of the Saudi, Emirati and/or Qatari governments. The remaining 62 interviews were conducted with subject matter experts, including academics, analysts and journalists, of various nationalities and based in North America, Europe, and several MENA countries (including Qatar and the UAE).

Interviewees were selected following a purposive sampling process similar to the one employed in the selection of the government communication statements outlined above. In line with Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, they were “chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study.”³³ Working within the means available to the author, the recruitment of interviewees also involved what Patton refers to as opportunistic sampling,³⁴ whereby the sample emerges from the context of, and the opportunities arising throughout, the research process. Most interviews were arranged through direct emails from the author; some were organised by third parties, including other interviewees. While all individuals contacted for interviews were selected for their relevant expertise, and with the aim to have mostly equal distribution across the three case studies, those who participated were therefore a self-selecting group. For example, while London-based Saudi and Qatari diplomats agreed to be interviewed, the UAE’s embassy responded to the author’s email saying that no suitable individual was available. Furthermore, the author was only able to visit Qatar to conduct in-person interviews (in April 2018). Planned visits to the UAE and Saudi Arabia could not take place. In October 2018, the author was notified by the University of Exeter advising against travel to the UAE for research purposes due to the case of a British doctoral student who had been detained in the country. Plans for a visit to Saudi Arabia had to be suspended in early 2020 due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite these limitations, it was possible to conduct a

³³ Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, “Designing and Selecting Samples.”

³⁴ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002).

significant number of interviews with individuals from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, either in person in London, or over the phone and in writing. Moreover, through professional engagements, primarily with the Royal United Services Institute in London, the author has worked directly with Saudi, Emirati and Qatari government delegations and representatives over the course of the research.

Most interviews took place in person (in the UK, Germany and Qatar) or over the phone, and some were conducted in writing via email. Interviews generally consisted of semi-structured conversations. Depending on the interviewees' availability and expertise, they lasted between 15-120 minutes (most took 30-60 minutes) and focused on all or some areas delineated by the analytical framework. All interviewees were briefed on the objectives of the thesis and how the interviews would be used.³⁵ Interviewees also completed an Interview Consent Forms, stipulating their willingness to be cited by name or under an anonymising alias and agreeing to the author's specifications for (personal and interview) data storage arrangements.³⁶ All data was stored on the author's password-protected electronic devices; all interviews were summarised by the author in bullet-point notes, including direct quotes taken from audio recordings where applicable.

While many interviews produced unique insights, their main purpose was to support, clarify and contextualise takeaways from the analysed government communications and secondary literature. Moreover, many interviews also allowed the author to iteratively test conclusions and arguments as they were emerging during the research and analysis process; others served as valuable opportunities to engage in in-depth background discussions (e.g. about political dynamics and conflicts in Egypt, Libya, Syria or Yemen, in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar were involved). A number of interviewees expressed strong and, in some instances, politically motivated opinions about one or more of the countries under examination, while others stuck very closely to what could be described as 'the party line'. This included some interviewees from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, but also several other subject matter experts. However, the potential for such incidents to skew the thesis' analysis was mitigated by the total number of interviews conducted (they were also

³⁵ This included a one-page document in advance, and a detailed explanation at the beginning of each interview.

³⁶ These procedures were approved by the University of Exeter's SSIS College Ethics Committee, reference 201516-095.

distributed relatively equally across the three case studies), as well as the wider research design that relies on corroboration and contextualisation across multiple data sources.

All interviews were tremendously valuable. Many are cited throughout the thesis, including with direct quotes. Occasionally, interviews are referenced grouped together with others to indicate where arguments were emphasised or shared by several interviewees. Some interviews do not appear at all in the footnotes. However, since these have still substantially informed the thesis' analysis as a whole, they are listed in the bibliography.

2. 3. 3. Secondary Literature: Providing Context, Documenting Behaviour

The thesis is anchored in, and builds on, the wider literature covering developments in the MENA during the 2010s. This includes academic books and journal articles, studies and briefing papers published by think tanks and other research institutions, non-fiction books and long-form articles intended for wider audiences, and media reporting. Several prominent contributors to this body of literature also participated in interviews conducted for the thesis.

The thesis uses the secondary literature in three main, closely linked ways: First, it serves as the source of inspiration, context and direction for the thesis. Since the thesis itself aims to contribute to the field, it is based on a thorough review of the available literature that identifies gaps and trends. Second, as noted above, the analytical scope of the thesis means that it relies on detailed accounts and studies of various specific issues that cannot be replicated, or even adequately summarised, in the limited space available. Throughout the thesis, references contained in the footnotes therefore serve to indicate both the sources the author draws on, and where the reader can find further information. Third, the thesis uses the secondary literature, particularly accounts documenting the foreign policy behaviour of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar during the 2010s, as a resource to corroborate, clarify and contextualise assertions made in examined government communications or by interviewees. Aside from being cited throughout the thesis, the secondary literature is reviewed in Chapters 3-5.

2. 4. Chapter Breakdown: Organising the Thesis

The thesis consists of 13 chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, precedes this chapter; it explains the rationale for the thesis and its research questions. Chapter 2, this chapter, outlines the thesis' approach and methods.

Chapters 3 and 4 develop the thesis' analytical framework, with the former focusing on its theoretical components, and the latter locating it within the Middle East Studies literature. As such, Chapter 4 also encompasses a literature review, surveying contemporary debates relevant to the areas the thesis touches on. Chapter 5 continues the review of the existing literature, but narrows it to the sub-fields concerned with the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Together, Chapters 3-5 provide the foundation for the thesis' analytical section that follows.

Chapters 6-11 answer the thesis' two research questions for each of the three countries under examination: Chapters 6 and 7 deal with Saudi Arabia's perceptions of the strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s, and the Kingdom's conception of stability in the MENA, respectively. Chapters 8 and 9 do the same for the UAE, and Chapters 10 and 11 for Qatar. Chapter 12 draws together the conclusions and arguments of the preceding six chapters, it compares and contrasts Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perspectives, identifying areas of overlap and divergence; it serves as the thesis' main conclusion. Chapter 13 briefly re-engages with the thoughts outlined in Chapter 1, and offers some final takeaways, including suggestions for further study.

3. Stability and Order in Theory and in Foreign Policy

The Analytical Framework — Part 1

Stability and order, together with their opposites, instability and disorder, are at the top of the agenda in contemporary discussions about global politics. Kissinger writes that “our age is insistently, at times almost desperately, in pursuit of a concept of world order.”¹ For many, the MENA is an area where this search for stability in an environment of disorder is especially urgent.² Yet, although there is a sense that regional instability is particularly acute in the 21st century, the question of what constitutes stability in the MENA is far from new. As noted in Chapter 1, Sands wrote in 1957 that “unless we have in mind the same general order of things as the peoples of the Middle East have in mind when we say ‘stability’, we can not very well hold a meaningful conversation with them on these matters.”³ Sands’ argument also supports the thesis’ foundational assumption and underscores the relevance of its research questions. It notes that stability in the MENA can be defined in different ways by different people, and that exploring what countries mean when they declare stability to be their objective merits investigation. Furthermore, Sands hints at the relationship between stability and order as closely linked concepts, suggesting that the former term evokes an understanding of a “general order” it emerges from.

This chapter begins to construct the original analytical framework the thesis uses to analyse and compare Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s conceptions of stability in the MENA. Proceeding in three main sections, it provides the theoretical foundation for the framework, drawing on findings from strategic theory and the wider relevant political science and international relations literature. The first section outlines the thesis’ foundational understanding that states conduct foreign policy according to their often unique and subjective perceptions of their strategic environment. The second section establishes the

¹ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 2.

² Richard N. Haass, “The Unraveling: How to Respond to a Disordered World,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014), 70-79; Kissinger, *World Order*; Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson, eds., *Shifting Sands: The Unraveling of the Old Order in the MENA* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2015); Robert Worth, *A Rage for Order: The MENA in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

³ William Sands, “Requirements for Middle Eastern Political Stability,” *Social Science* 32, no. 4 (1957), 201.

thesis' understanding of stability and order as theoretical concepts, before the third section further examines them as foreign policy objectives. The chapter argues that stability — both at the state and the regional level — is the outcome of complex systems of order. States want stability because they consider it an enabling condition that allows them to pursue and protect their national interests in the strategic environment. Their measures to maintain or (re)build stability are therefore attempts to shape and influence systems of order according to their own unique perceptions and conceptions of the environment and the condition they call stability.

3. 1. Foreign Policy in the Strategic Environment: A Matter of Perceptions

Before examining stability and order, as concepts and as objectives of foreign policy, it is useful to first establish the more fundamental theoretical grounding of the thesis, its research question and its analytical framework. The next chapter explains that the thesis follows the common approach in the literature to study the international relations of the MENA by combining several theoretical paradigms. The thesis is anchored in the understanding that states conduct foreign policy within, and in order to shape and influence, a strategic environment that is constantly and dynamically evolving, and in which cause-and-effect relationships are often subject to interpretation. Consequently, states can rarely, if ever, have a complete and objectively accurate understanding of the strategic environment, the challenges and opportunities they confront therein, and the outcomes, including second- and third-order effects, of their actions. This is one of the core pillars of strategic theory.⁴ The notion that the strategic environment is — by its very nature — never fully knowable is contained in the Clausewitzian concept of “friction” or the “fog of war.”⁵ In contemporary works, the strategic environment is often described as characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity — in short: VUCA.⁶ This environment “can be interpreted from multiple perspectives with various conclusions that may suggest a variety of equally attractive solutions.”⁷

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2006).

⁵ Lonsdale A. Hale, *The Fog of War* (London, Edward Stanford, 1896).

⁶ Stephen J. Gerras, ed., *Strategic Leadership Primer* (Carlisle: United States Army War College Press, 2010).

⁷ Yarger, *Strategic Theory*, 18

While this understanding of the strategic environment makes foreign policy a challenging undertaking, it does not deter states from attempting to make sense of the world around them and working to influence it. According to several renowned writers on strategy, the process of analysing the strategic environment constitutes the starting point of any strategy formation process.⁸ The published national security strategies of countries like the USA or the UK begin with a description of how their governments understand the world and the threats and opportunities they are facing.⁹ Similarly, major foreign policy speeches (including many of those examined for this thesis) often start with a survey of what the strategic environment looks like from the perspective of the speaker and their country.

As states analyse the strategic environment, they seek to break down the complexity into its component actors and the dynamics between them, identifying what they see as key themes and trends. Even set rules governing the system cannot be established, states can at least come up with their best guesses and rules of thumb.¹⁰ In effect, states thereby formulate their (most likely) unique perceptions of the strategic environment, which then guide their subsequent attempts to shape and influence it to their advantage. In fact, not all states may acknowledge that the nature of the environment inherently limits their ability to fully understand it, and instead convince themselves that they are capable of grasping even the smallest intricacies shaping the world around them. They certainly may believe that their understanding is more advanced than that of other states. Yet, regardless of whether the states under examination themselves accept the conception of the strategic environment as being characterised by VUCA, for the purpose of this thesis, it has an important explanatory function: It provides the theoretical rationale for why two or more states can have different perceptions of the same problem — for example, instability and disorder in the MENA — without any of them necessarily having to be right or wrong.

⁸ John Baylis, Colin Gray and James Wirtz, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Clausewitz, *On War*; Freedman, *Strategy*; Basil H. Liddell-Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967).

⁹ See for example: Her Majesty's Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (London: The Stationery Office, 2015); US Government, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," Trump *Whitehouse Archives*, 2017, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [accessed 8 April 2021].

¹⁰ Yarger, *Strategic Theory*.

The logic of the thesis' two-part research question is based on this foundation. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar proclaim their commitment to stability in the MENA, they are responding to, acting within, and trying to influence the strategic environment as they see it. The VUCA nature of the environment means that they are likely to have different perceptions of the challenges they are confronting. Moreover, if they have different understandings of what constitutes and drives instability and disorder in the region, they are also likely to have different conceptions of what stability in the MENA looks like.

3. 2. Stability and Order in Theory

In the existing relevant literature, stability and order are defined to varying degrees of detail and precision. Order is used as a cumulative term to describe the system that accounts for the dynamics within a given entity. The order of an individual state therefore describes its political, economic and social system and how the state's component parts — the government, security services, society etc. — interact with one another.¹¹ At the regional level, order encompasses the structures, mechanisms, institutions and norms that determine interactions between the region's member states.¹²

Definitions of stability, meanwhile, are frequently vague, wide-reaching or not given at all. Dictionary definitions are a starting point; at the most abstract level, stability describes a condition characterised by a certain permanence and endurance, as well as an ability to absorb and manage change while resisting sudden and fundamental transformation.¹³ In the political science literature reviewed in the following pages, stability — and its derived adjective, stable — is usually linked to descriptions of order. The adjective stable gives an assessment of the likelihood that a particular order will endure in its current form. The noun stability is generally used to describe the positive outcome of an order; it is frequently evoked in conjunction with, or even as a synonym of,

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2011); Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Roland Paris, *After War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹² Mohammed Ayoob, "From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 53, no 3, (1999), 247-260; Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997).

¹³ Collins Dictionary Online, "Stability," available at: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/stability>. [accessed 8 April 2021]; Merriam-Webster Online, "Stability," available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stability>. [accessed 8 April 2021]; Oxford English Dictionary Online, "Stability," available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/188535?redirectedFrom=Stability>. [accessed 8 April 2021].

security or peace. However, an order — even one that is stable — can also produce instability, which is associated with violence, insecurity and war.

As is outlined below, the literature contains numerous different approaches to how stability can be defined and measured. Yet, each approach is essentially a description — to varying degrees of detail — of the system of order regarded as most likely to produce stability. Much of this work takes focus either on individual states or inter-state and regional relations, but conclusions can often be applied across both contexts. More importantly, the two levels are often viewed as interdependent.

3. 2. 1. State-Level Stability and Order

Articles by Hurwitz¹⁴ and Dowding and Kimber¹⁵ offer succinct overviews of five traditional understandings of stability in the context of individual states. They are best understood not as mutually exclusive approaches, but rather as building on one another in an attempt to arrive at something akin to a theory of stability.

The first and most basic understanding of stability is to define it as, and measure it through, the absence of violence. Specifically, this means the absence of large-scale, civil and political violence such as wars, civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, or violent government oppression (rather than sporadic criminal violence or constitutionally sanctioned violence meted out by a state's justice system).¹⁶ The absence of violence, but not necessarily the existence of peace, is also seen as a foundational characteristic of international stability.¹⁷ Yet, this explanation does not contain any information about the kind of order that leads to this absence of violence; it can therefore be seen as a necessary, but insufficient indicator of stability.

The second traditional approach to explaining stability engages with the notion that stability should infer a degree of permanence and ties it to the longevity of a

¹⁴ Leon Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability," *Comparative Politics* 5, no. 3 (1973), 449-463.

¹⁵ Keith M. Dowding and Richard Kimber "The Meaning and Use of 'Political Stability'," *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983), 229-243.

¹⁶ Ivo K. Feierabend and Rosalind L. Feierabend, "Aggressive Behaviours within Polities, 1948-1962: A Cross-National Study," *Conflict Resolution* 10, no. 3 (1966), 249-271; Bruce Russett et al., *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

¹⁷ Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson, eds., *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2013); Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983), 205-235; Yuen Foong Khong, "The Elusiveness of Regional Order: Leifer, the English School and Southeast Asia," *The Pacific Review* 18, no. 1 (2005), 23-41.

state's government.¹⁸ This understanding therefore makes the presence of a political authority the decisive variable of a state's order and focuses on its ability to prevent or withstand threats to its survival (e.g. coup d'états, revolutions etc.). Barry emphasises the domestic context of this view of stability, arguing that this definition should not require governments to be able to withstand invasions by another state, as this would effectively equate stability with military power.¹⁹ In an attempt to account for different political systems, especially democracies in which changes of government are part of the regular process, Sanders and Herman propose to use the percentage of a mandated term a government survives to measure stability.²⁰ However, as Hurwitz²¹ and Dowding and Kimber²² note, government longevity can only indicate past and present stability; assessments about the future are only possible through extrapolation of the past.

The third understanding builds on the idea of government longevity, but links stability to a government's (and the political system's) popular legitimacy. Lipset²³ and a number of other scholars²⁴ argue that stability requires that the majority of the population accepts, and ideally supports, the prevailing political system and only seeks to change the government through mechanisms provided therein. This approach to understanding stability is therefore tied to an order in which there is a popular perception that the government is ruling in a just and fair manner; and there is a constitution or normative social contract that regulates the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. This understanding therefore moves the definition of stability from a focus on a single variable to a more systems-based approach in which the relationship between two main components of the state — government and population — is seen as key.

¹⁸ Arthur S. Banks and Robert B. Textor, *A Cross-Polity Survey* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1963); Brian Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (London: Collier-Macmillan 1970); Jean Blondel, "Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1 (1968), 1980-1203; T. R. Gurr, "Persistence and Change in Political Systems," *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974), 1482-1504; D. Sanders, and V. M. Herman, "The Stability of Governments in Western Democracies," *Acta Politica* 12 (1977), 346-377; Michael Taylor and V. M. Herman, "Party Systems and Governmental Instability," *American Political Science Review* 65 (1971), 28-37.

¹⁹ Barry, *Sociologists*.

²⁰ Sanders and Herman, "The Stability."

²¹ Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches."

²² Dowding and Kimber, "The Meaning."

²³ Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Base of Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

²⁴ Ken Binmore, "Natural Justice and Political Stability," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 157, no. (2001), 133-151; Arthur S. Goldberg, "A Theoretical Approach to Political Stability," paper presented at: *64th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, Washington DC, 1968; Martin C. Needler, "Political Development and Socioeconomic Development: The Case of Latin America," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968), 889-897; Frank Tannenbaum, "On Political Stability," *Political Science Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (1960), 161-180.

The fourth traditional understanding of stability concentrates on the ability of a state's political system to deal with pressures for change. There is recognition that stability has to allow for a degree of change, especially when this is mandated by the system itself (i.e. the constitutional transfer of power), but only up to a point. Authors following this approach define stability via the political system's capacity to absorb change without fundamentally changing its own structures and nature.²⁵ Ake further specifies that to fulfil this requirement to normalise and institutionalise change, a system has to possess three main qualities: it has to enable the effective implementation of policies; it must have a political class able and willing to lead without being factionalised to the point of violent opposition; and it needs to be based on a mutual acceptance and identification between the government and the governed.²⁶ A more recent contribution to this understanding of stability is contained in Taleb's concept of antifragility.²⁷ He argues that a degree of volatility and change is a necessary component of stability. For stability to exist, an order must not just be capable of managing change, but of harnessing it to become stronger.

The final approach to defining stability that Hurwitz²⁸ and Dowding and Kimber²⁹ outline, sees stability as a multifaceted, complex social attribute that emerges from an order with any number of variables. These include the absence of violence, government durability, popular legitimacy and a system's ability to absorb change without collapsing, but also extend to issues such as effective and efficient political decision-making, including through the building of strong institutions; economic prosperity measured with indicators such as growth, employment rates and income equality; and foreign relations and the stability of neighbouring countries (recognising the potential for spillover effects of instability).³⁰

²⁵ Claude Ake, *A Theory of Political Integration* (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1967); Claude Ake, "A Definition of Political Stability," *Comparative Politics* 7, no. 2 (1975), 271-283; David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1965); D. Sanders, *Patterns of Political Instability* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

²⁶ Ake, *A Theory*; Ake, "A Definition."

²⁷ Nassim N. Taleb, *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder* (London, Penguin Books, 2012).

²⁸ Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches."

²⁹ Dowding and Kimber, "The Meaning."

³⁰ Christian Denny, "For Stabilisation," *Stability* 2, no. 1 (2013), 1-14; Ernest A. Duff and John F. McCamant, "Measuring Social and Political Requirements for System Stability in Latin America," *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 4 (1968), 1125-1143; Yi Feng, "Democracy, Political Stability and Economic Growth," *British Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 3 (1997), 391-418; Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).

This notion of stability as the product of a complex system of order that cannot be neatly disaggregated into its component parts and straightforward cause and effect relationships, also appears in the literature focusing on fragile and failing states. Beginning in the 1990s and driven by international policy challenges such as the Balkan wars, conflicts in Rwanda and Somalia, and the aftermath of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, this field has received much attention. Here, stability is discussed as a foreign political objective of states around the world as they consider instability, resulting from fragile or failing states, as enabling threats to their national security. This literature therefore also offers insights for the next section of this chapter that discusses stability as an objective of foreign policy. Scholars writing on the subject generally identify fragile states as those that are, or risk becoming, unable to control their territory, uphold their monopoly on the use of legitimate force within their borders, and provide basic services to their populations.³¹ They therefore argue that stability can be fostered by strengthening a state's internal order through measures such as building institutions and a justice system capable of upholding the rule of law; making governments more inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of the governed (frequently through elections); and facilitating economic development that improves the population's living conditions.

There is agreement in this literature that building stability in a country is a complex and lengthy process. As Dennys summarises, while "instability can arise very quickly, the formation of stability takes substantial time."³² This hints at a paradox in discussions about stability, both in theory and practice: Stability is associated with permanence and continuity, but it can also be upended and collapse into instability very quickly. This reinforces the tendency to tie explanations and assessments of stability to ever more elaborate descriptions of the order necessary to bring it about.

Illustrations of this are index methodologies developed to rank countries around the world according to their stability/instability. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators ranking, for example, assesses a country's political stability by measuring 19 different indicators, including transfers of power, the

³¹ For example: Mats Berdal and Dominik Zaum, eds., *Political Economy of Statebuilding: Power After Peace* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013); Lothar Brock et al., *Fragile States: War and Conflict in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Peter Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (London: Vintage Books, 2009); Fukuyama, *State-Building*; Roland Paris, "Peacebuilding and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997), 54-89; Paris, *After War's End*.

³² Dennys, "For Stabilisation," 11.

nature and intensity of protests, and ethnic tensions.³³ Similarly, the Fund for Peace aggregates 12 quantitative and qualitative indicators across five categories — political, economic, and social factors, plus general cohesiveness and levels of foreign intervention — to arrive at its Fragile State Index.³⁴ The Economist Intelligence Unit's Political Instability Index combines 15 indicators to assess a country's vulnerability to an economic crisis and societal upheaval³⁵ with the methodology developed by the US-government funded Political Instability Task Force, which considers infant mortality (as a proxy for development), discrimination against minorities (a proxy for equality), instability in the immediate neighbourhood, and the system of government (favouring established systems over transitional ones).³⁶

3. 2. 2. International and Regional Stability and Order

As noted above, in the first instance, international or regional stability is also generally associated with an absence of violence. Colby and Gerson refer to stability in inter-state relations (they focus primarily on nuclear powers) as strategic stability;³⁷ and Khong emphasises that stability does not have to equate to peace and can therefore be used to describe the condition between two countries that are not at war with each other, but also do not enjoy friendly relations (e.g. the USA and Soviet Union during the Cold War).³⁸ Beyond this basic understanding, international stability is generally considered through one or a combination of the major theoretical international relations paradigms.

³³ The full list of indicators included in the World Bank's measurement of political stability consists of: orderly transfers power, armed conflict, violent demonstrations, social unrest, international tensions and terrorist threat, cost of terrorism, political terror scale, security risk rating, intensity of internal conflicts (ethnic, religious or regional), intensity of violent activities of underground political organisations, intensity of social conflicts (excluding conflicts relating to land), government stability, internal conflict, external conflict, ethnic tensions, protests and riots, terrorism, interstate war, civil war. See: World Bank, "Worldwide Governance Indicators," 2017, available at: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#doc>. [accessed 8 August 2018].

³⁴ The Fund for Peace cohesion indicators are: the security apparatus, factionalism amongst elites, group grievances; the economic indicators are economic decline and poverty, uneven development, human flight and brain drain; the political indicators are state legitimacy, public services, human rights and the rule of law; social indicators are demographic pressures, refugees and internally displaced people; the cross-cutting indicator is external intervention. See: Fund for Peace, "Fragile States Index," 2017, available at: <http://www.fragilestatesindex.org> [accessed 8 August 2018].

³⁵ The Economist Intelligence Unit assessed underlying vulnerability by measuring inequality (the Gini coefficient), state history, corruption, ethnic fragmentation, trust in institutions, status of minorities, history of political instability, proclivity to labour unrest, level of social provision, neighbourhood, regime type and factionalism; and economic distrust by measuring growth in incomes, unemployment, and level of income per head. See: The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Political Instability Index," 2010, available at: http://viewswire.eiu.com/site_info.asp?info_name=social_unrest_table&page=noads&rf=0 [accessed 8 August 2018].

³⁶ Center for Systemic Peace, "Political Instability Task Force," 2014, available at: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/index.html>. [accessed 8 August 2018].

³⁷ Colby and Gerson, *Strategic Stability*.

³⁸ Khong, "The Elusiveness."

In the realist tradition, stability is related to the outcome of an order centred around the balance of power between states competing in an anarchical environment. Where there is balance, stability results; imbalance can lead to instability and conflict. Looking at the global level, scholars have advanced different views, arguing that stability is most likely to emerge in a unipolar,³⁹ bipolar⁴⁰ or multipolar (Waltz's second-best option) world; non-polarity is generally seen uncondusive to stability.⁴¹ Constructivists, meanwhile, argue that stability emerges where international order is based on dialogue between nations, on shared norms and values such as mutual respect for sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention.⁴²

Another influential understanding of international stability is encapsulated in the Liberal Peace Theory.⁴³ Building on Kant's vision of perpetual peace, it holds that the absence of war is most likely between liberal, preferably democratic, states. Trade between liberalised economies creates interdependencies; and liberal governments share values and create international institutions to develop and uphold an international rules-based system with mechanisms for conflict resolution. This creates stability both internationally and internally. Rummel finds that democratic states are not just less likely to fight other democratic states, but that they are also less likely to use excessive violence against their own people and collapse into civil war.⁴⁴ Yet, the literature also notes that while democracies are least likely to collapse into civil war or wage war against each other, states in the process of transition towards democracy are often more prone to inter- and intra-state violence than autocracies.⁴⁵ They highlight that that democracy, while providing a mechanism for managing and absorbing change, also introduces a level of internal competition that requires solid institutional structures and commitments to values such as the protection of minorities and an empowered opposition to remain peaceful and non-violent.

³⁹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁴⁰ Colby and Gerson, *Strategic Stability*; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008);

⁴¹ Richard N. Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow US Dominance," *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2008, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2008-05-03/age-nonpolarity>. [accessed 8 April 2021].

⁴² Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴³ Doyle, "Kant;" Michael Doyle, Christopher Layne and Bruce Russett, "The Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995), 164-184.

⁴⁴ R. J. Rummel, "Democracy, Power, Genocide, and Mass Murder," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39, no. 1 (1995), 3-26.

⁴⁵ Brock et al., *Fragile States*; Collier, *Wars*; Huntington, *Political Order*; Paris, *After War's End*.

Since this thesis deals with the regional context of the MENA, the literature discussing regional order and stability is particularly relevant. The study of regions has increasingly attracted attention following the end of the Cold War. In general, the literature views regions as systems in which the domestic and international behaviour of one member directly affects the others.⁴⁶ Thompson further specifies that regions consist of at least two geographically proximate members that have regular exchanges and view themselves — and are seen by others — as belonging to a region.⁴⁷ Taking a security studies approach, Buzan and Waever study regional security complexes that are bounded (geographically; with a specific set of members); have an anarchic structure and are uni-, bi-, or multi-polar (i.e. following the realist tradition); and in which there are patterns of enmity and amity between members (i.e. a constructivist view).⁴⁸ Also focusing on security, Lake and Morgan define regions through security externalities: security-related events occurring in one country that directly affect other countries (e.g. civil wars leading to refugee flows and creating safe havens for terrorists, or arms races between two countries that affect the calculations of a third).⁴⁹ While some studies treat regions either as mini-versions of the global system (making it possible to extrapolate findings to the world as a whole), or as entirely unique (with findings only applicable to the studied region), most tend to take a nuanced approach. They regard regions as comprising a set of variables that can be found in all regions — thereby making comparison possible — but in different combinations and with individual variables becoming more or less important.⁵⁰ By following this approach, the thesis acknowledges that the MENA is not fundamentally different from other regions of the world, but still accepts that its analytical framework is directly tied to the political and historical context of the region⁵¹ (see Chapter 4). Any attempt to apply the framework to a different region would therefore require some adaption.

⁴⁶ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*; Buzan and Waever, *Regions*.

⁴⁷ William R. Thompson, "The Regional Subsystem: A Conceptual Explication and a Propositional Inventory," *International Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1973), 89-117.

⁴⁸ Buzan and Waever, *Regions*.

⁴⁹ Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Key works explaining and following this approach (often for regions other than the MENA) include: Ayoob, "From Regional System," Buzan and Waever, *Regions*; Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), 731-753. Jervis, *System Effects*; Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

The literature generally understands the dynamics in a region — in other words, the regional order — as the result of an interplay between domestic, regional (interactions between member states and the behaviour of leading regional powers), and global variables (including the global system and the level of engagement in the region by external powers).⁵² Beyond this basic understanding, scholars present different typologies for the forms of regional order — which, in turn, can provide for varying degrees of stability — they consider possible. Ayoob sees a spectrum of regional orders ranging from the basic existence of the system itself; to one of ad-hoc bilateral or multilateral security arrangements; to a regional society in which states come together, usually around a convening regional power that is considered as legitimate, to set up regional institutions and conflict management mechanisms; to a regional community in which member states pool their sovereignty and consider each other's security as equal to their own.⁵³ Buzan and Weaver describe three major types of regional order: conflict formation, in which there are no constraints on the realist balance of power competition amongst the member states; a security regime with treaties and institutions regulating inter-state interactions; and a security community with high levels of cooperation, similar to Ayoob's proposition.⁵⁴

Lake and Morgan list five sequential levels of regional order. The lowest is an order in which member states seek to restrain one another through maintaining a balance of power; next comes an order constructed by a security concert of a region's major powers that seeks to limit the most destabilising aspects of balance of power competition; the third level is a multilateral, collective security order in which all members of the region come together to manage their interactions and conflicts; fourth is a pluralistic community where member states maintain autonomy, but begin to pool their sovereignty and construct such tight economic and political institutional interdependencies that war between members becomes unlikely; finally, there is full integration amongst the member

⁵² Ayoob, "From Regional System;" Buzan and Waever, *Regions*; Sandra Destradi, "Regional Powers and their Strategies: Empire, Hegemony, and Leadership," *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), 903-930; Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers;" Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*; Detlef Nolte, "Macht und Machthierarchien in den internationalen Beziehungen: Ein Analysekonzept fuer die Forschung ueber regionale Fuehrungsmaechte," *GIGA Working Papers* (Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2006)

⁵³ Ayoob, "From Regional System."

⁵⁴ Buzan and Waever, *Regions*.

states to the point where they essentially become one.⁵⁵ Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll explicitly build on Lake and Morgan's model, but do not consider their five levels as necessarily sequential. They see an unstructured region in which no form of recognisable order exists; a regional order determined entirely by balance of power dynamics; a major power concert similar to the Lake and Morgan's second step; a hegemonic order in which a single state is powerful enough to dictate and police the rules of regional interactions; and a collective security order with shared norms, pooled sovereignty and, usually, significant institutional infrastructure.⁵⁶

From all four views, it is clear that a region's basic order is typically seen as governed by the realist forces of anarchy and polarity in which balance of power dynamics can produce stability, but with little certainty for the future. Only through conscious efforts to cooperate, growing interdependencies, institutional structures, and, ultimately, the development of shared norms and values — all familiar concepts from liberalism and constructivism — are regional orders seen as becoming more effective at managing conflicts and preventing war, therefore producing a level of stability that allows an increased degree of certainty about future developments.

3. 2. 3. Stability as an Outcome of Complex Order

The preceding discussion of stability and order lead to two main conclusions that provide the foundation for considering stability and order as objectives of foreign policy, and therefore shape the focus of this thesis.

The first conclusion is that stability and order are closely linked. Order, whether at the state- or regional level, is the cumulative term for the complex system of actors and interactions, and structural, institutional and normative factors that make up the individual state or region under examination. Stability can describe a specific order, thereby giving an assessment of its likely endurance in the face of pressures for change; and it can be an outcome of an order. In the latter case, stability is generally associated with the absence of violence and then defined through an often detailed description of the order it emerges from. It follows that if stability is considered as an objective of foreign policy, it has to be

⁵⁵ Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

⁵⁶ Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers."

pursued through measures aimed at creating the kind of order understood to be conducive to stability.

The second conclusion is that there is no consensus about what form of order is most conducive to stability. The majority of contributors to the above reviewed literature approach the subject from a perspective that is either implicitly or explicitly influenced by Western traditions of scholarship and political development. When thought through to their conclusions, the various understandings of internal stability tend to lead to arguments favouring liberal-democratic orders; and at the regional level the most highly rated models of cooperative or collective security orders are probably best illustrated with examples such as the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This is most clearly apparent in the fragile/failing states literature, where authors often aim to make recommendations for the foreign policies of the mostly Western states engaged in overseas interventions. Fundamentally, however, the complex nature of political orders means that there is no linear relationship between order and stability. Instead, complexity opens space for varying interpretations and perspectives of how stability can or should be maintained or (re)built.

3. 3. Stability in Foreign Policy

These two conclusions are crucial to understanding stability as an objective of foreign policy. Reinforced by the notion of foreign policy being conducted in the VUCA strategic environment, they mean that two countries sharing the goal of fostering stability in a third country can have very different views of what kind of order should be pursued. Their efforts to influence the third state's political order may therefore be considered ineffective or even destabilising by other countries. Furthermore, states generally want to maintain or (re)build stability for their own unique reasons. They view stability as an enabling condition in which they can best pursue their national interests in the strategic environment. As outlined above, stability is associated with attributes such as permanence, predictability and gradual, manageable (rather than sudden and uncontrollable) change. In a way, stability is therefore seen as something that tames the VUCA nature of the strategic environment and therefore reduces the risks and threats to a state's interests therein.

3. 3. 1. Fear of Instability

As outlined in Chapter 1, stability is the declared objective of many countries' foreign policies, not just the three Gulf monarchies studied in this thesis. The above cited academic literature about fragile states and stabilisation offers insights as to why this is the case. As mentioned, much of this literature takes an either explicit or implicit Western perspective, and many of its conclusions are echoed in official documents of Western governments explaining their commitment to fostering stability through their foreign policies. Although this thesis is expressly focused on the perspectives and views of non-western countries, it is possible to extract a number of relevant insights from this discourse.⁵⁷

The common point of departure is that the absence of stability — i.e. instability — in one country can pose major threats to the national security and interests of neighbouring countries, but also of countries around the world. Instability, particularly when manifested in violent conflict, is seen as providing the operational space for international terrorism and organised crime. It is regarded as a driver of humanitarian and refugee crises, and even in non-conflict times can facilitate migration flows to less unstable regions. Instability is also considered an obstacle for economic development and trade, either directly by removing the affected country (and its resources) as a trade partner, or indirectly by necessitating diversions of trade routes to avoid conflict areas. Finally, for countries committed to a rules-based international system, instability — and especially violent conflict — represents a challenge that needs to be dealt with both through the system, and in order to preserve the system.⁵⁸

As a foreign policy objective, stability is therefore often determined by national interest considerations. States want stability in other countries because it implies the absence of instability and the threats connected with it (see, for example, the national security strategies of the UK or US governments).⁵⁹ Governments may cite altruistic and humanitarian reasons for their efforts to foster stability, but they are also concerned with their own interests. The British

⁵⁷ This is also necessary because, to the authors knowledge, very little non-Western academic work or published government material on this subject is available.

⁵⁸ Berdal and Zaum, *Political Economy*; Brock et al., *Fragile States*; Collier, *Wars*; Fukuyama, *State-Building*; Paris, "Peacebuilding;" Paris, *After War's End*;

⁵⁹ HMG, *National Security Strategy*; US Government, "National Security Strategy," *Obama White House Archives*, 2015, available at: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf [accessed 8 April 2021]; US Government, "National Security Strategy 2017."

government's Building Stability Overseas Strategy is a good example of this. It explains that stability overseas matters to Britain because its absence can mean "a catastrophe for the individuals and countries directly involved;" it affects other countries in the surrounding region; and — ultimately — it poses "a threat to our security and prosperity."⁶⁰

3. 3. 2. Building the 'Right' Kind of Stability

As discussed above, the prescriptions for stabilising fragile countries in the academic literature and in Western policy documents tend to favour liberal and democratic orders. Yet, the literature also notes that the foreign policy behaviour of Western states suggests less deterministic interpretations of what stability looks like. Scholars argue that the term stability is often used as shorthand for describing conditions that allow Western governments to best protect and pursue their interests.⁶¹ In most cases, this means an absence of at least large-scale violence, the presence of a political authority acting as an effective partner in bilateral relations, and a notion that these conditions will persist even under pressure to change.

Western policy debates about what kind of order is most conducive to stability in the MENA are instructive in this context. They also underscore the remarkably different interpretations of what stability looks like. Two broad models of stability are often juxtaposed: The first equates stability with the long-standing authoritarian status quo in the MENA, and the ability and willingness of governments to maintain domestic and regional security and cooperate with Western countries; the second proffers that stability requires reformed political and economic systems that aspire to inclusiveness, equality and respect for human rights. The general literature consensus is that Western foreign policies

⁶⁰ Her Majesty's Government, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (London: The Stationery Office, 2011), 7.

⁶¹ This is frequently is frequently raised in the fragile states literature; see for example: Berdal and Zaum, *Political Economy*; Brock et al., *Fragile States*; Kjetil Selvik and Stig Stenslie, *Stability and Change in the Modern Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2011).

have long privileged the former over the latter, all the while acknowledging (implicitly or explicitly) that long-term stability requires reform.⁶²

The Arab Uprisings reinvigorated this debate, but its roots go back decades. Sands wrote in 1957 that “if any one thing is certain, it is that the peoples of the MENA themselves are not interested in stability, if by the term we mean preservation of the status quo.”⁶³ Arguments that lasting stability that serves Western interests requires reform and even a concerted effort to disrupt the status quo of authoritarian stability were particularly popular in the early 2000s. They permeated the rhetoric surrounding the Bush Administration’s Freedom Agenda, which included regime change in Iraq and intensified pressure on Arab governments to liberalise their countries’ political systems.⁶⁴ Yet, US (and European) policy soon reverted to accommodation with many non-democratic regimes. In Iraq, regime change sparked civil war; elections in Egypt (2005), Lebanon (2005) and Palestine (2006) brought gains for Islamist and even Western-designated terrorist groups (the MB, Hizbollah and Hamas, respectively); and the popularity of Western adversaries such as Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad soared after Israel’s 2006 war against Hizbollah in Lebanon. The theoretical conviction that liberalising reforms would further stability in the MENA remained part of Western foreign policy rhetoric (for example in Barack Obama’s 2009 Cairo speech), but the apparent threat to short-term stability was seen as too great to abandon the status quo.⁶⁵

⁶² See for example: Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, eds., *Unchartered Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); Jack Covarrubias and Tom Lansford, eds., *Strategic Interests in the MENA: Opposition or Support for US Foreign Policy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007); Inge Fryklund, “Rethinking Stability,” *Small Wars Journal*, 19 February 2014, available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/rethinking-stability>. [accessed 8 April 2021]; Gregory F. Gause, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011), 81-90; Colin H. Kahl and Marc Lynch, “US Strategy after the Arab Uprisings: Toward Progressive Engagement,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2013), 39-60; Joel Peters, ed., *Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012); Richard Youngs and Tamara Cofman-Wittes, “Europe, the United States and Middle Eastern Democracy,” in *Promoting Democracy and the Rule of Law: American and European Strategies*, ed. Thomas Risse and Michael McFaul (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2009).

⁶³ Sands, “Requirements,” 202.

⁶⁴ Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks at the American University in Cairo,” US Department of State, 20 June 2005, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>. [accessed 9 September 2019]; Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011).

⁶⁵ Thomas Carothers, *US Democracy Promotion During and After Bush*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007); Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010); Morten Valbjorn and Adnre Bank, “The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of MENA Regional Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011), 3-24.

In the early stages of the Arab Uprisings, Western governments again proclaimed their conviction that the status quo was, in fact, a source of instability and that lasting stability in the MENA would require reformed domestic orders.⁶⁶ In its Building Stability Overseas Strategy, which emphasises the need to learn from the Arab Uprisings, the British government commits to supporting “structural stability,” based on inclusive and representative political systems, equal access to economic opportunities and respect for human rights.⁶⁷ Yet, as the Arab Uprisings have given way to political turmoil in Egypt and Tunisia and protracted civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and have become overshadowed by Daesh and refugee and migration crises, Western foreign policy has largely returned to its familiar posture. Strong, albeit non-democratic regimes are again seen as safer guarantors of stability — i.e. the conditions in which Western interests are protected — than the uncertain promise of stability based upon reform and change.⁶⁸ A decade after the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings, the warning assertions by Hosni Mubarak and Bashar Al-Assad that the only alternative to the stability enforced by them is chaos,⁶⁹ seem to have convinced many in Western capitals.

3. 4. Conclusion: The Framework in Theory

This chapter establishes the thesis’ theoretical understanding of stability and order, as concepts and as objectives of foreign policy. It substantiates the thesis’ foundational assumption that states ostensibly united by the declared objective of stability can have different, and possibly contradictory, conceptions of what this means. The chapter’s conclusions in this regard can be summarised as three interlinking points:

First, as states find themselves in a strategic environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), their understanding of the world tends to be subjective, often incomplete and evolving, and likely

⁶⁶ David Cameron, “Prime Minister’s Speech to the National Assembly Kuwait,” UK Cabinet Office, 22 February 2011, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-to-the-national-assembly-kuwait>. [accessed 9 September 2019]; Barack Obama, “Transcript of Remarks by the President on the MENA and North Africa,” Obama White House Archives, 19 May 2011, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa> [accessed 9 September 2019].

⁶⁷ HMG, *Building Stability*, 7.

⁶⁸ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (London, Hurst & Company, 2015); Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the MENA* (New York, Public Affairs, 2016).

⁶⁹ See: Peter Beaumont et al., “US Hatches Mubarak Exit Strategy as Egypt Death Toll Mounts,” *The Guardian*, 11 February 2011, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/03/egypt-regime-death-toll-tahrir>. [accessed 9 September 2019]; Selvik and Stenslie, *Stability and Change*.

different even from that of their neighbours. Through their foreign policies, states seek to influence and shape this environment to their advantage; their actions are based on their unique perceptions of who the key actors are and what constitutes the decisive cause-and-effect relationships they need to affect. Second, in abstract terms, stability — at the state- and regional level — is best understood as an outcome of complex systems of order. This complexity, not unlike the VUCA nature of the environment, means that stability cannot be tied to any single variable. Instead, there can be many different, often detailed descriptions of the kind of order that can yield stability, none of them universally right or wrong. In practical terms, states tend to associate stability, at least in the first instance, with the absence of large-scale violence and a degree of certainty that there will be no major, sudden changes to existing political realities. Third, beyond these basic notions, states see stability as a condition in the strategic environment — the presence of a friendly government, for example, or a reassuring distribution of power between friends and foes in a region — they consider favourable to their interests. States' conceptions of stability therefore describe the environment as they want to see it, which, in turn, builds on their unique perception of what the world around them looks like and which of its components must be preserved or changed to attain stability.

Building on these conclusions, the thesis' analytic framework — and the thesis' research questions — divide each of the three case studies in two: Chapters 6, 8 and 10 analyse Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's respective perceptions of their strategic environment — how each of them has made sense of developments in the MENA during the 2010s; and Chapters 7, 9 and 11 explore Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's conceptions of stability in the MENA — their descriptions of the region as they want to see it. To provide additional structure, the analytical framework is further developed in the next chapter. By linking it to, and rooting it in the existing Middle East Studies literature, each of the framework's main parts is further sub-divided to facilitate more systematic analysis and comparison.

4. Stability and Order in the MENA

The Analytical Framework — Part 2

Stability in the MENA, or rather its absence, is the subject of urgent debate in the 21st century — both in academic and policy circles. In a global climate of flux and uncertainty, the region is described as “the chief cauldron of contemporary disorder,”¹ or the “epicentre of world crisis.”² There is a sense in the literature that a combination of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and its aftermath and the Arab Uprisings and their consequences have upended the — albeit fragile — regional status quo and triggered a period of upheaval and transformation. Nevertheless, as emphasised in previous chapters, the search for systems of order that can yield stability in the MENA — both at the state- and regional level — has occupied observers and policy-makers around the world for decades. This chapter captures parts of the academic and analytical discourses that have accompanied this search.

The chapter proceeds in two main parts. The first, shorter part anchors the thesis’ analytical framework in the Middle East Studies literature. Borrowing from well-established approaches to studying and conceptualising the region’s international relations, it establishes the sub-headlines, as it were, that provide further structure to the framework’s two main components, the perception of instability and conception of stability. The second, more extensive part then takes the structure of the framework and reviews the contemporary debates in the literature relevant to each of its sections. It is important to note that the aim of the chapter is not to establish a notion of an accurate perception of the strategic environment in the MENA or a correct conception of stability in the region against which those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar can then be judged. Instead, this literature review is intended to clarify the focus of each element of the analytical framework, and as a survey of the current state of the discourse the thesis seeks to contribute to. Moreover, the chapter consciously does not cover much of the literature about the three Gulf states studied in this thesis — that is the subject of the next chapter.

¹ Richard N. Haass, “The Unraveling: How to Respond to a Disordered World,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014), 70.

² Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

4. 1. The Framework in the Middle East Studies Literature

The academic field this thesis builds on, and seeks to contribute to, is the study of the international relations of the MENA and the foreign policies of its states. Scholarly interest in this area has steadily grown throughout the second half of the 20th century, and especially over the past two decades. The field is anchored in seminal works such as Kerr's *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd Al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958-1970*,³ Seale's *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958*,⁴ and Dessouki and Korany's *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (first published in 1984 and revised in 2008).⁵ Today, there are a number of important works surveying and analysing the region's international politics. In addition to Dessouki and Korany's volume, this thesis particularly leans on Nonneman's *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*⁶ and Ehteshami and Hinnebusch's *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*,⁷ but it also draws on books by Miller,⁸ Fawcett,⁹ Gause,¹⁰ Halliday,¹¹ Hinnebusch,¹² Kamrava¹³ and others. The Arab Uprisings, in particular, have inspired much scholarship, often including valuable insights about the regional and international dynamics influencing, and triggered by, the

³ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁴ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1986).

⁵ Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008).

⁶ Gerd Nonneman, ed., *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014).

⁸ Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁹ Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Gregory F. Gause, ed., *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹² Raymond A. Hinnebusch, ed., *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

¹³ Mehran Kamrava, ed., *International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

uprisings; these include — but are not limited to — books by Danahar,¹⁴ Filiu¹⁵ and Lynch.¹⁶

Scholars in this field, including many of those cited above, often point to a tendency in academic, journalistic and policy discourses, especially in the West, to view the MENA through the lens of external powers' interests and as a region dominated by external interference and proxy dynamics. While acknowledging the crucial role outside powers have played in the MENA's history, including in the formation of its modern state system and through many political and military interventions,¹⁷ they emphasise the need to focus on the MENA as a region determined by the dynamics between its member states, and to analyse these states as foreign political actors in their own right.¹⁸ Kerr's appeal to "dispel the notion of Arab politics as a projection of decisions made in Washington"¹⁹ and other capitals outside the region, cited in Chapter 1, is a prominent example of this. Nonneman makes a similar argument: Although his study of Arab states' foreign policies seeks to produce insights relevant for European policy-makers, he highlights the need to overcome a "bias in the study of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis" that tends to view the foreign policies of states in the global south (including the MENA) as determined by "the straightjacket of Northern-imposed dependency."²⁰ As noted in the introductory chapter, this thesis heeds Kerr and Nonneman's calls and explicitly focuses on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar as regional powers guided by their very own interests and perceptions of regional dynamics.

The thesis' approach is influenced by another well-established tradition in the literature: As noted in the previous chapter, there is a general consensus in the field that no single theoretical paradigm is sufficient to understand and explain

¹⁴ Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (London, Hurst & Company, 2015).

¹⁶ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012); Marc Lynch, ed., *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

¹⁷ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs* (New York: Basic Books, eBooks, 2011).

¹⁸ In addition to the above, also see for example: Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict and the International System* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Pinar Bilgin, *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2005); Bahgat Korany, "International Relations Theory: Contributions from Research in the Middle East. Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics," in *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*, eds. M. Tessler, J. Nachtway and A. Banda (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, vi.

²⁰ Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*, 1.

the MENA's international relations.²¹ Instead, authors — including those cited above — generally develop analytical approaches drawing on various International Relations schools and theories.

Exceptions from this rule worth mentioning — as they provide important insights for many of the mixed theory approaches, including this study — include Walt's *The Origin of Alliances*,²² David's *Explaining Third World Alignment*²³ and Barnett's *Dialogues in Arab Politics*.²⁴ Walt studies the alliances and alignments of MENA states between 1954-1979 to develop his neo-realist balance-of-threat concept, which itself builds on Waltz's balance-of-power model.²⁵ Walt sees states as balancing against each other according to their respective threat perceptions, which are influenced by hard power metrics, but also calculations about a potential adversary's aggressive intent, and ideational challenges to political legitimacy. David, who develops the concept of omni-balancing, emphasises how domestic dynamics affect MENA governments' foreign policies. He argues that their international behaviour is not just designed to balance against external threats, but also against potential internal challenges. Barnett, meanwhile, proposes a constructivist approach to explaining MENA, and especially Arab, international politics. He argues that contrary to realist assumptions, regional affairs are not about "the survival of the state that dwelled in anarchy but the survival of the Arab leader who dwelled in Arabism,"²⁶ and that inter-state dynamics should therefore not be understood as a process of balancing, but rather as a constant dialogue over how to reconcile unifying ideas such as Arabism with state sovereignty and regime survival.

Notwithstanding these three important contributions to the literature, the general practice in the field is to combine and integrate different theories. Dessouki and Korany explain the foreign policies of Arab states through a framework that brings together factors from the domestic environment (including geography, population, social structures, economic capabilities, military power and political systems), perceptions and conceptions of foreign policy orientation and

²¹ Richard Youngs, "Living with the Middle East's Old-New Security Paradigm," in *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Ana Echagüe (Madrid: FRIDE, 2013), 15.

²² Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

²³ Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, no 2 (1991), 233-256.

²⁴ Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979);

²⁶ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 9.

strategic culture, decision-making processes and, ultimately, a close examination of actual foreign policy behaviour.²⁷ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, meanwhile, develop an approach they call complex realism. They take realist assumptions of anarchy and balance of power dynamics as their point of departure, but merge them with a structuralist focus on the region's interdependencies with the rest of the world; a constructivist understanding of trans- and sub-state identities and shared norms; and the effects of different, and in many cases ongoing, state formation processes.²⁸ Finally, Nonneman proposes a complex model of international politics, consisting of a three-tier system of domestic, regional and international factors influencing MENA states' foreign policies.²⁹

This tendency towards analytical eclecticism fits with the thesis' analytic framework outlined in the previous chapter. The notion of the VUCA nature of the strategic environment implies that no single theoretical paradigm can sufficiently explain it. Furthermore, the understanding of stability as an outcome of a complex system of order, as well as the cited literature on domestic and regional order that this understanding rests on, are based on approaches that flexibly combine and integrate various theoretical lenses.

4. 1. 1. Structuring the Framework

Dessouki and Korany argue that studying foreign policies has to include examining a state's foreign policy orientation.³⁰ They highlight the importance of idiosyncratic elements in foreign policy-making in Arab political systems, including top-down decision-making structures controlled by small circles of ruling elites, and the common conflation of regime survival and national interests. Examining "the way the state's foreign policy elite perceives the world and their country's role in it,"³¹ is essential to understanding foreign policy behaviour. This corresponds with the thesis' analytical framework, which regards states' perceptions of their strategic environment as the foundation for their conceptions of stability. The framework therefore builds on Dessouki and Korany's approach and adopts three sub-sections to give further structure to the

²⁷ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*.

²⁸ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

²⁹ Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*.

³⁰ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

analysis of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of their strategic environment. To establish how the three countries made sense of regional developments over the course of the 2010s, a relatively long timeframe, it captures their interpretations of the main events, actors, dynamics and outcomes that are contained in the big picture narrative communicated by senior leaders and officials. The analysis is then further narrowed to the main drivers of instability and disorder in the MENA the three countries identified, taking into account both their narratives and other sources; and the final subsection focuses on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of themselves and their regional roles.

Approaches to studying the international relations of the region, including, most explicitly, that developed by Nonneman, commonly organise the factors impacting the formation of foreign policies into three concentric — albeit interconnected — circles: domestic, regional and global. Given the linkages between state-level and international stability outlined in the previous chapter, the thesis analytical framework adapts this segmentation for its own purposes. Instead of exploring how global, regional and domestic factors shaped Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's behaviour, it more specifically focuses on the three countries' views about the aspects of order (at each of the three levels) that they considered as conducive to stability. To arrive at their conceptions of stability in the MENA, the framework therefore asks three related questions: How did Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar think about the political and socio-economic order of individual Arab states? What kind of regional order did they seek? And what role did they want external powers to play in the region?

Dessouki and Korany, Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, and Nonnman's models provide further guidance to focus the thesis analysis in this regard: At the international, global level, they all highlight the need to account for the impact of decades of external interventions on the region; the strategic importance of relations with external powers in the security and economic considerations of many regional states; and the extent to which the interactions of global powers, within or outside the rules-based international system, shape the context in which developments in the MENA take place. At the regional level, Nonneman, and Ehteshami and Hinnebusch's models emphasise studying aspects anchored in realism such as polarity and the region's balance of power; and

how inter-state relations are shaped by ideational factors and adherence to common norms and rules. This corresponds with the theories of regional order outlined in the previous chapter, which also advocate combining insights from realism, constructivism and liberalism.³² Finally, at the domestic level, the three models regard regime security considerations as the main driver of foreign policy-making in the MENA, while emphasising the importance of idiosyncratic factors such as elite perceptions, as outlined above. However, as they break this down into various contributing variables, aspects emerge that are directly relevant to conceptions of state-level order. They all focus on how relationships between governments (or ruling elites, or, more generally, the state) and the governed are organised; and if and how this confers popular legitimacy upon the rulers, or at least enables them to exercise control over populations. In this regard, three interlinked thematic pillars stand out: the political system, the state's economic development, and questions of how Islam — and especially political Islam — is or is not integrated into the political system (there is a general view that Islamism has replaced Arabism as the key identity- and ideational challenge MENA states are confronting).

Together with the more theory-focused discussion in the previous chapter, the Middle East Studies literature, and in particular the three volumes by Dessouki and Korany, and Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, and Nonneman, therefore substantiates and gives structure to the thesis' analytical framework. The understanding that stability is the outcome of a complex system of order means that any attempt to limit the analysis to a specific set of variables is inevitably a simplification. However, once this caveat is accepted and a model is not expected to be deterministic, the developed framework can provide a guiding handrail and facilitate the structured analysis of, and comparison between, the thesis' three case studies. In essence, it provides a set of headlines as follows:

First, the analysis focuses on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's **Perception of the Strategic Environment**. This includes a) their **Big-Picture Narrative** of the main developments they have seen in the MENA during the 2010s; b) their

³² Mohammed Ayoob, "From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 53, no 3, (1999), 247-260; Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), 731-753; David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997).

assessments of the **Drivers of Instability and Disorder**; and c) their **Self-Perception**, how they have seen their own role and interests in the region. The framework then focuses the analysis on the three countries' **Conception of Stability**, which is broken down into how they envisaged (a) **The Role of External Powers and the International System**; (b) **The Organisation of the Regional Order**; and (c) **State-Level Order**, which includes their views about political and economic systems, and how Islam should be integrated into politics.

4. 2. (In)Stability and (Dis)Order in the Middle East Studies Literature

As stated in the introduction, the thesis does not seek to judge Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of the strategic environment and conceptions of stability in the MENA against an established truth. Nevertheless, in order to provide some historical and contextual background to the analysis, it is useful to briefly review how these issues are discussed in contemporary debates.

Stability and order are key topics in the academic literature on the MENA, both in discussions about individual countries and in studies of the region's international relations. In general, there has been a widespread notion that stability has been a rarity in the MENA since the creation of its modern state system in the early 20th century; and that order has been rigid and authoritarian in most states, while being highly contested and therefore a source of instability at the regional level.³³ Over the first two decades of the 21st century this notion has been reinforced. With the US-led so-called War on Terror after 11 September 2001 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and especially since the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11, there is a sense that the region has entered a new phase of disorder and instability — both at the individual state- and the regional level — that appears likely to last for decades to come.³⁴ Kissinger prognosticates that “if order cannot be achieved by consensus or

³³ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012); Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East* (London: Penguin Books, 2013); Rogan, *The Arabs*.

³⁴ Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*; Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson, eds., *Shifting Sands: The Unraveling of the Old Order in the MENA* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2015); Gareth Stansfield, “The Remaking of Syria, Iraq and the Wider Middle East: The End of the Sykes-Picot State System?” *RUSI Briefing Paper* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2013); Youngs, “Living with the Middle East's Old-New Security Paradigm”.

imposed by force, it will be wrought, at disastrous and dehumanising cost, from the experience of chaos.”³⁵

4. 2. 1. Regional Affairs in the 20th Century

Due to limited space available in this chapter and this thesis, the review below primarily focuses on contemporary debates related to stability and order in the MENA in the 21st century. Many of these debates have roots stretching back decades that are referenced as succinctly as possible throughout. In the existing literature, authors often summarise the evolution of regional dynamics in the MENA by dividing them into four overlapping chronological phases (displaying a remarkable level of agreement as to what these are).³⁶ In order to facilitate the review below, these phases are very briefly summarised here.

The first phase — termed “the age of imperialism,”³⁷ — extends from 1918-1955, covering the period from the creation of the region's modern state system after the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, led by external powers such as Great Britain and France. This also includes the creation of Israel and — to a significant degree in reaction to it — the emergence of Arabism as a political ideology, both of which would shape regional politics going forward. Barnett summarises the key tenets of Arabism as the commitment to Arab unity, opposition to Israel, and rejection of Western imperialism.³⁸ As such, Arabism posed a key challenge to many Arab rulers: they had to guard their own power and their countries' sovereignty, while confronting popular pressure for Arab solidarity and unification. Barnett describes the creation of the Arab League in 1945 as an attempt by Arab elites to reconcile these competing interests. Many rulers struggled to strike a balance between their reliance on Western (and Soviet) security assistance, and pressures to expel imperial powers from the region. The Arab defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War undermined the legitimacy of several Arab rulers; but it also

³⁵ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 129.

³⁶ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*; Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Fawcett, *International Relations*; Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*.

³⁷ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, “The Middle East Regional System,” in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014).

³⁸ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*.

established Israel as an external enemy providing justification for foreign- and security-political decision-making in many Arab states henceforth.³⁹

The second phase, 1955-1970, is the subject of Kerr's *The Arab Cold War*.⁴⁰ It was a period of intense and multi-faceted regional competition between the MENA's conservative monarchies, which maintained strong security ties to Western powers; and emerging revolutionary republics, led by Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt, which championed Pan-Arabism, but also competed against each other for primary. The global division into US and Soviet-led camps also played out in the MENA, but scholars generally see Cold War dynamics as interacting with, rather than shaping, the various fault lines in regional politics at this time.⁴¹ The competition between the monarchies and republics played out most prominently in the North Yemen Civil War (1962-1970); and the rivalry between the republics led to the failure of the short-lived Egyptian-Syrian union in the United Arab Republic (1958-1961), and the dynamics that precipitated the 1967 war with Israel. Kerr and others⁴² explain how under pressure to demonstrate their anti-Israel credentials, the republics found themselves in a war they were not prepared for. The humiliating Arab defeat in the Six-Day War transformed regional politics, upending the Arab Cold War. In Kerr's words, "Arab leadership suddenly ceased to be a plausible ambition. There could hardly be a competition for prestige when there was no prestige remaining."⁴³

Hinnebusch describes the third phase, 1970-1990, as consisting of five years of "state-centric Arabism" giving way to an "age of realism."⁴⁴ Feeling less threatened by one another, there was a brief moment of Arab strategic unity in the early 1970s. Egypt and Syria spearheaded the 1973 October War against Israel and were backed by Arab oil producers who instituted an embargo against Israel's international supporters. Yet, the war ended in another defeat and triggered a process of Arab states gradually changing their positions towards Israel from rejection to accommodation. The next Arab-Israeli War —

³⁹ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*; Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East*; Rogan, *The Arabs*.

⁴⁰ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

⁴¹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Fawcett, *International Relations*; Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

⁴² Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East*; Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*; Rogan, *The Arabs*; Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁴³ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 129.

⁴⁴ Hinnebusch, "The Middle East Regional System."

Israel's 1982 intervention in Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990) — did not provoke a large-scale regional response. In 1976, Arab states had created the Arab Deterrent Force to end the civil war, but the initiative was mostly dominated by Syrian regime interest. In general, Arab regimes focused on consolidating their authoritarian power structures at home and confronting a new set of emerging security challenges.⁴⁵ In 1979, three seminal events transformed the regional strategic environment: Egypt's peace agreement with Israel and alignment with the USA (which, in competition with the Soviet Union, was expanding its influence in the region) meant the end of Cairo's role as the natural leader of the Arab world, and contributed to the gradual shift of power towards the region's increasingly wealthy oil producers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The Islamic Revolution in Iran upset the regional balance of power between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Iran's revolutionary Islamism emerged as a major ideational threat to many countries in the region; Tehran began sponsoring Arab groups such as Hizbollah in Lebanon, which would grow into one of the most powerful non-state actors in the region; and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) dominated security dynamics in the Gulf region for the next decade, leading — amongst other developments — to the creation of the GCC. Finally, while Iran's ideology was closely tied to Shiism, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Sunni fundamentalists drew attention to the growing potency of revolutionary political Islam as a threat to regimes across the region. Islamism replaced Arabism as the transnational, identity-based phenomenon undermining regimes' domestic legitimacy.⁴⁶

The fourth phase, “the age of US hegemony” or “Pax-Americana,”⁴⁷ covers the 1990s until the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 collapsed the inter-Arab regional order and the resulting US-led intervention cemented America's status as the only remaining global superpower after the end of the Cold War, and the effective guarantor of stability and order in the MENA. Subsequently, US strategy in the region focused on containing Iraq and Iran; building security partnerships with many Arab countries; supporting Israel and facilitating the Middle East Peace Process; and,

⁴⁵ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*; Fawcett, *International Relations*; Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

⁴⁶ In addition to the previously cited accounts of this period by Hinnebusch and others, see also: Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020).

⁴⁷ Hinnebusch, “The Middle East Regional System.”

together with European partners, pushing states in the region to liberalise their economic systems (accompanied by, though with less urgency, calls for political reform).⁴⁸ Many authors therefore point to Israel, Turkey and Iran as the strongest regional powers in the MENA during the 1990s.⁴⁹ Arab regimes, meanwhile, were internally focused. They implemented limited economic reforms, often ensuring that supportive elites were reaping the benefits; and had to defend their authoritarian political systems against Islamist opposition and, increasingly, terrorism. The civil war in Algeria between the military and an ever-more extreme Islamist opposition stood as a warning example to others in the region.⁵⁰

4. 2. 2. The Strategic Environment in the MENA

The preceding summaries trace how various cataclysmic events have continuously transformed the MENA's international relations during the 20th century, profoundly impacting regional- and state-level systems of order. The first two decades of the 21st century each began with their own watershed moments, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and the Arab Uprisings, respectively. The following sections organise the review of the Middle East Studies literature's contemporary debates most relevant to the thesis by following the structure of the thesis' analytical framework outlined above. While the thesis uses the framework to analyse the specific perspectives of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, here the focus is on the scholarly discourse about the MENA's international relations more generally, providing context for the thesis as a whole.

4. 2. 2. 1. The Big-Picture Narrative

The thesis analyses Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's big-picture narratives to understand how they have made sense of their strategic environment. Similarly, attempts to construct paradigms that capture the essence of the complex dynamics at play in the MENA of the 21st century are commonplace in the academic literature (and related policy discussions). These often include the

⁴⁸ Thomas Carothers, *US Democracy Promotion During and After Bush*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007); Jack Covarrubias and Tom Lansford, eds., *Strategic Interests in the MENA: Opposition or Support for US Foreign Policy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007); Gause, *The International Relations*; Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*.

⁴⁹ Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*; Paul Noble, "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? Regional Pressures and Constraints," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds. Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Hinnebusch, "The Middle East Regional System"; Noble, "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System?"

drawing of parallels to historical examples of major periods of regional upheaval and conflict.

One such attempt sees religion and its relationship with politics as the key characteristic of instability and disorder in the MENA.⁵¹ It variably suggests that the region is either in need of, or already going through, a period akin to the European Reformation or Enlightenment. In this context, political Islam, at least in its forms that embrace populist and participatory politics, is either considered as the potential solution, or as the outdated ideology that needs to be overcome in favour of secular divisions of religion and politics. Accordingly, regional instability and conflict are seen as resulting from the confrontation of these rival versions of order. Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* gives this understanding an international dimension, encompassing dynamics of external interventions in the region and anti-Western ideologies espoused by extremist groups like Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Daesh.⁵² However, there is widespread agreement in the literature that reducing regional affairs to a dichotomy between Islamism and secularism is too simplistic; although important, the role of Islam in politics and society is regarded one of many factors affecting order and stability in the MENA (see more below).

Another paradigm, also focusing on religion, sees regional instability through the lens of sectarianism.⁵³ Conflicts in Iraq, Syria or Yemen, and especially the regional Saudi-Iranian rivalry, are seen as part of a perennial pattern of enmity between Sunni and Shia communities. Proponents often liken the MENA's sectarian struggles to Europe's 17th-century Thirty Years' War between Catholic and Protestant states. It follows that the MENA needs its own version of the Peace of Westphalia to enshrine state sovereignty and the subordination of religion to international politics as foundations of its regional order. Yet, as with the Islamism-secularism dichotomy, most contributions to the literature regard

⁵¹ For example: Efraim Karsh, *The Tail Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015); John M. Owen and J. Judd Owen, "Enlightened Despots, Then and Now: The Truth About an Islamic Enlightenment," *Foreign Affairs*, 10 August 2015, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-08-10/enlightened-despots-then-and-now>. [10 October 2019].

⁵² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

⁵³ See for example: Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shia-Sunni Divide." *Analysis Paper* No 29 (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2013); Haass, "The Unraveling"; Kissinger, *World Order*; Greg Lawson, "A Thirty Years' War in the Middle East," *The National Interest*, 14 April 2014, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/thirty-years-war-the-middle-east-10266>. [10 October 2019]; Douglas Murray, "The Middle East's Own 30 Years War Has Just Begun," *The Spectator*, 17 June 2014, available at: <http://blogs.new.spectator.co.uk/2014/06/the-conflict-in-the-middle-east-is-far-bigger-than-isis-and-al-qaeda/>. [10 October 2019]; Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

sectarianism just one of many factors characterising instability in the MENA. Many highlight that in many countries — Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, for example — the upheavals of the Arab Uprisings did not have a Sunni-Shia sectarian dimension; and even in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen sectarianism is often regarded as a by-product of conflict and a tool used by state and non-state actors to mobilise popular support.⁵⁴

A paradigm that has won significant scholarly approval in recent years is that of the New Middle East Cold War, taking inspiration from Kerr's concept of the Arab Cold War.⁵⁵ Proponents of this paradigm do not argue that the same fault lines identified by Kerr — between Arab republics and monarchies, among the Arabist republics, and between the Arab states and Israel — have reemerged. Instead, they credit Kerr for offering a model to capture the region's contemporary strategic environment as a complex set of overlapping, intersecting, and sometimes seemingly contradictory conflict dynamics. These include, amongst others, the Saudi-Iranian contest for regional influence, encompassing power-political and religious-sectarian aspects; the competition and alignments amongst Sunni Arab states and Turkey (e.g. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt aligning against Qatar and Turkey); the struggle of many majority-Sunni states against Islamist opposition and non-state actors, both moderate and extremist; countries accusing one another of being too friendly with Israel or too close to external powers such as the US or Russia. The model therefore encompasses questions about sectarianism and the role of political Islam, but it reflects a much more complex and multi-faceted approach to understanding contemporary instability and disorder in the MENA. Its emphasis

⁵⁴ Hashemi and Postel make this point particularly succinctly: Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst and Company, 2017). See also: Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, eds. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst and Company, 2017); Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, eds., *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (London, Hurst & Co., 2015); H. A. Hellyer, *A Revolution Undone: Egypt's Road Beyond Revolt* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017); Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*; Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*; Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, iBooks, 2013); Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (London: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁵⁵ Gregory F. Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014); Nabeel A. Khoury, "The Arab Cold War Revisited: The Regional Impact of the Arab Spring," *Middle East Policy Council* 20, no. 2 (2013); Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*; Curtis R. Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 42 (2012); Michael Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux," in *Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism*, ed. Thanassis Cambanis (New York: The Century Foundation, 2017); Morten Valbjorn and Andre Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011): 3-24;

on the complexity of the dynamics at play also corresponds with the spirit of this thesis' own analytical framework.

4. 2. 2. 2. Drivers of Instability and Disorder

Much has been written about the drivers of instability and disorder in the MENA in the 21st century. As outlined above, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq is frequently identified as a key catalyst for instability. It represents a driver of instability in itself — intervention by an external power — and is understood as having triggered and/or reinforced several regional drivers, including Saudi-Iranian competition, sectarianism, and the proliferation of jihadi terrorist groups (especially AQ in Iraq, which would morph into Daesh).⁵⁶ The other key event, the Arab Uprisings, have spurred studies into what led to the collapse of political orders in several Arab states and contributed to worsening instability in following years. Here, too, scholars have identified a host of factors encompassing drivers at the state-, regional- and international levels (e.g. socio-economic conditions in individual Arab states, regional competition, and international intervention, respectively).⁵⁷ In order to avoid repetition, the literature covering this is reviewed together with the debates about stability in the sections below.

4. 2. 2. 3. States' Roles and Interests in the Environment

The self-perceptions of states in the MENA remain an understudied subject. Scholars looking at individual countries touch on how their respective governments understand their roles in the region (the next chapter reviews conclusions about Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in this regard). Works about the MENA's international relations (such as those cited above) tend to discuss self-perceptions in conjunction with idiosyncratic influences shaping policy-making processes. In this context, Dessouki and Korany, Ehteshami and Hinnbusch, and Nonneman all reference Holsti's idea of national role conceptions that derive from a combination of factors including the personalities of political leaders, prevailing ideologies and public opinion, and countries' histories, capabilities and needs.⁵⁸ An often cited example is Egypt under Nasser, who considered himself and his country — the most populous Arab

⁵⁶ Fawcett, *International Relations*; Hinnbusch, *The International Politics*; Kjetil Selvik and Stig Stenslie, *Stability and Change in the Modern Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2011).

⁵⁷ Danahar, *The New Middle East*; Fawaz Gerges, *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*;

⁵⁸ K. J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1970), 233-309.

state and historic hub of regional politics — on a mission to lead and transform the Arab world.⁵⁹ Kerr highlights how Arabist leaders in Syria and Iraq also sought to define their states as being at the forefront of regional change.⁶⁰ Other historical examples include Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya; both defined their own and their countries' roles as going beyond their national borders.⁶¹ In general, however, there is a sense that most Arab leaders and regimes have tended to define themselves and their countries as guardians of the status quo, rather than as pioneers of regional change.⁶²

Linked to this, though with much deeper roots in the literature, is the notion that MENA states' foreign policies are primarily driven by their regimes' efforts to ensure their own security and survival. As noted previously, this is one of the most foundational assumptions in the field.⁶³ Some argue that regime security and regime interests are more important to understand than national security and national interests when studying MENA states' policies.⁶⁴ Certainly, from the perspective of those making policy decisions, the interests of the regime and the nation can be understood as indivisible. Within the context of this thesis, it stands to reason that the objective of domestic regime security also affects how the three countries under examination conceptualise stability in the region.

4. 2. 3. Conceptions of Stability

As noted in the previous chapter, academic and policy debates about stability in the MENA have generally taken place between two poles: Stability as the result of a maintained status quo (e.g. upheld by long-standing and reliable authoritarian regimes); and stability as the prospective outcome of political and

⁵⁹ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*.

⁶⁰ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

⁶¹ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*; Cole and McQuinn, *The Libyan Revolution*; Rogan, *The Arabs*.

⁶² Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

⁶³ See for example: Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "GCC Foreign Policy: From the Iran-Iraq War to the Arab Awakening," *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers* 1 (2015): 13-22; Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Gregory F. Gause, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf," *Security Studies* 13, no. 2 (2003), 273-305; Peter Jones, *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1998); Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble and Rex Brynen, eds., *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993); Curtis R. Ryan, "Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 20 August 2015, available at: <http://pomeps.org/2015/08/20/regime-security-and-shifting-alliances-in-the-middle-east/>. [accessed 10 October 2019]; Robert Springborg, "Arab Militaries," in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 142-159.

⁶⁴ Mohammed Ayoob, "Unravelling the Concept of 'National Security' in the Third World," in *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*, eds. Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble and Rex Brynen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 31-55.

socio-economic change (i.e. the democratisation of the region). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to capture this discourse in all its nuances. Instead, the following three sections briefly review some of the key themes in the literature that are of particular relevance to the subsections of the analytical framework: the role of external powers in the MENA, the organisation of the regional order, and state-level order.

4. 2. 3. 1. The Role of External Powers

Rogan describes the involvement of external powers in the MENA as “one of the defining features of modern Arab history.”⁶⁵ A significant portion of the Middle East Studies literature is devoted to studying how external powers — especially the USA and Russia, but also European states and, more recently, China — have shaped, and continue to shape, the region’s international relations, both through direct engagement in pursuit of strategic interests (e.g. access to oil or counter-terrorism), and as a byproduct of changes in global power dynamics.⁶⁶ During the 2010s, the thesis’ main area of focus, much of this discourse has focused on questions about the trajectory of US policy in the region,⁶⁷ and the increasing presence of other powers, most notably Russia.

There is consensus in the literature that the level of US engagement in the MENA has been, and remains, one of the key variables impacting regional politics. That is also apparent in the above summarised accounts of how the MENA’s international relations have evolved during the 20th century. By the late 1990s, the USA was regarded as the region’s effective — albeit external — hegemon, guaranteeing the national security of many MENA states and upholding the regional order.⁶⁸ In the early 2000s, US engagement in the MENA arguably reached its apex. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and influenced by neo-conservative ambitions, the Bush administration sought to reshape the region around regime change in Iraq and the so-called Freedom Agenda. This was at least partially driven by Washington’s conception that

⁶⁵ Rogan, *The Arabs*, Chapter 1.

⁶⁶ Many of the works on the region’s international relations cited in the first section of this chapter serve as excellent resources in this regard.

⁶⁷ For an overview of the various dynamics at play see: Steven W. Hook Tim Niblock, eds., *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015. Dozens of other important works are cited throughout this section.

⁶⁸ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Fawcett, *International Relations*; Halliday, *The Middle East*.

stability in the MENA required more liberal and democratic systems of order.⁶⁹ Besides the substantial body of literature analysing the destabilising effects of the Iraq War,⁷⁰ scholars commonly describe the democratisation agenda pursued by the US and its European partners during the 2000s as inconsistently implemented and ultimately unsuccessful. They also emphasise that it fundamentally contradicted most regional governments' basic conceptions of stability by questioning their continued hold on power.⁷¹

Since the end of the Bush administration, and throughout the 2010s, the literature about US policy towards the MENA — much of it still in its infancy — has been dominated by debates about the prospects for, and the effects of, reduced American engagement in the region. There is a general sense that for all the differences between the Obama and Trump administrations, their approaches to the MENA were shaped by common factors: a disillusionment with interventionism (resulting from the Iraq War, but also the aftermath of the 2011 Libya intervention), and a general downgrading of the MENA amongst US foreign policy priorities due to a narrower definition of US interests in the region (not least driven by changes in international energy market trends).⁷² Both focused on counter-terrorism and led the international campaign against Daesh, but sought to limit the involvement of US troops in on-the-ground combat operations, while taking a hands-off approach to political developments inside most states. In the early stages of the Arab Uprisings, the Obama administration had backed change in several Arab states (urging Egyptian President Mubarak to resign, working with NATO and regional partners to intervene in Libya, and calling for President Assad's removal in Syria), but by 2013 it was neither willing to condemn the overthrow of President Morsi in Egypt as a coup, nor to intervene militarily to punish the Syrian government for using chemical

⁶⁹ Carothers, *US Democracy Promotion*; Covarrubias and Lansford, *Strategic Interests in the Middle East*; Rogan, *The Arabs*.

⁷⁰ See for example: James Bluemel and Renad Mansour, *Once Upon a Time in Iraq: History of a Modern Tragedy* (London: BBC Books, 2020); Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007);

⁷¹ Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, eds., *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); Joel Peters, ed., *Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

⁷² See for example: Daniel R. DePetris, "Americans Are Tired of Middle East Mayhem," *The National Interest*, 17 January 2019, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/americans-are-tired-middle-east-mayhem-41837>. [accessed 20 October 2019]; Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman-Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (2019), 88-100; Robert Malley, "The Unwanted Wars: Why the Middle East Is More Combustible Than Ever," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2019), 38-46.

weapons.⁷³ President Trump, meanwhile, was explicit in voicing his disinterest in how governments in the region were conducting their domestic affairs.⁷⁴

However, in seeking to reduce US engagement in the MENA and urging regional powers to take more responsibility for regional security, the Obama and Trump administrations also pursued policies intended to alter the regional order in fundamental — albeit different — ways. Both identified Iran as a major destabilising force in the MENA. The Obama administration focused on negotiating the JCPOA to restrict Iran's nuclear programme, hoping that deescalation at the regional level could follow, while calling on America's partners in the region (especially the Gulf states) to "share the neighbourhood"⁷⁵ with Tehran, much to their chagrin.⁷⁶ The Trump administration, meanwhile, instituted its maximum pressure strategy, withdrawing from the JCPOA, ramping up sanctions and taking spectacular military action such as killing Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January 2020.⁷⁷ Yet, observers also characterise President Trump's decision-making in the MENA as inconsistent and unpredictable, highlighting especially the lack of a US response to the attack — widely attributed to Iran — on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.⁷⁸ The Trump administration also sought to change the regional status quo with regard to the Middle East Peace Process. It recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital

⁷³ For works on the Obama administration see: Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the US Role," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015), 18-27; Gary Sick, "The Obama Doctrine," *POMEPS Studies* 7, Visions of Gulf Security (2014), 10-12; Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2015), 2-10. See also publications by Obama era officials and the President himself, including: Hilary R. Clinton, *Hard Choices: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015); Robert Gates, *Duty* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2014); Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2020); Ben Rhodes, *The World As It Is: Inside the Obama White House* (London: Bodley Head, 2018).

⁷⁴ For works on the Trump administration see: Giorgio Cafiero, "The 'Trump Factor' in the Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 127-44; Michael Doran, "The Strategy Washington Is Pursuing in the Middle East Is the Only Strategy Worth Pursuing," *Mosaic*, 7 January 2019, available at: <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2019/01/the-strategy-washington-is-pursuing-in-the-middle-east-is-the-only-strategy-worth-pursuing/>. [accessed 10 January 2020]; Martin Indyk, "Disaster in the Desert: Why Trump's Middle East Plan Can't Work," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2019), 10-20; Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, "Trump Didn't Shrink U.S. Military Commitments Abroad—He Expanded Them," *Foreign Affairs*, 3 December 2019, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-03/trump-didnt-shrink-us-military-commitments-abroad-he-expanded-them>. [accessed 10 January 2020]

⁷⁵ In: Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> [accessed 15 September 2019].

⁷⁶ See for example: Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁷⁷ See for example: James M. Dorsey, "Killing of Iranian General: US Reaps More Than It Wished For," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 2 (2020), 1-5; Ilan Goldberg, Elisa Catalano Ewers and Kaleigh Thomas, "Reengaging Iran: A New Strategy for the United States," (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2020); Kimberley Anne Nazareth, "Trump's Policy Towards Iran," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 23, no. 2 (2019): 22-35.

⁷⁸ See for example: Frederick W. Kagan, "Attribution, Intent, and Response in the Abqaiq Attack," (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2019); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Rebalancing Regional Security in the Persian Gulf." (Houston: Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2020).

and endorsed Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights; it presented the heavily pro-Israeli “Prosperity to Peace” plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and brokered the normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, the “Abraham Accords” (and championed rapprochement between Israel and other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia).⁷⁹ The general expectation amongst observers — supported in the writings of government officials⁸⁰ — is that the Biden administration will also seek to limit US engagement in the MENA,⁸¹ cementing the literature consensus that while the US remains the most powerful external power, the 2010s have brought “the end of its regional hegemony.”⁸²

Concurrent with debates about US (dis)engagement, scholarly attention during the 2010s has increasingly focused on the involvement of other external powers in the region. There have been various debates about how European countries — the UK, France and Germany, in particular — could play more prominent and/or different roles than in the past. Britain and France pushed for the 2011 Libya intervention, for example; both also sought to re-emphasise their positions in the Gulf; and London, Paris and Berlin were keen supporters of the JCPOA. In general, however, analysts mostly concluded that European countries’ policies towards the MENA have remained closely tied to those of the USA, lacked coordination and political will to make a major impact, and were overshadowed by political developments on the continent itself (Brexit, Ukraine,

⁷⁹ Michael Doran, “The Dream Palace of the Americans: Why Ceding Land Will Not Bring Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2019), 21-29; Sigurd Neubauer, *The Gulf Region and Israel: Old Struggles, New Alliances* (New York: Kodosh Press 2020); Tova Norlen and Tamir Sinai, “The Abraham Accords – Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik?” *Security Insights* 064 (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2020).

⁸⁰ Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, “America’s Opportunity in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2020, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>. [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁸¹ Steven A. Cook, “No Exit: Why the Middle East Still Matters to America,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 6 (2020), 133-42; James F. Jeffrey, “Biden Doesn’t Need a New Middle East Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 15 January 2021, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-01-15/biden-doesnt-need-new-middle-east-policy>. [accessed 20 January 2021]; Karlin and Cofman-Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory.”

⁸² Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “Making Foreign Policy in the Midst of Turbulence,” in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds., Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 349. See also: Stephens, “The Arab Cold War Redux”; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Fire and Fury in the Gulf,” *Gulf States Analytics*, 31 January 2018, available at: <http://gulfstateanalytics.com/archives/1718>. [accessed 16 May 2018].

the migration crisis etc.).⁸³ Russia, meanwhile, is widely regarded as the external power that has most significantly expanded its presence in the MENA during the 2010s. Its re-emergence as an important security actor in the region was spearheaded by its intervention in Syria, but extended much further, including to its expanding involvement in Libya towards the end of the decade, and generally growing bilateral relations with many Arab countries, including those in the Gulf.⁸⁴ Together with China, Russia is seen as supporting the authoritarian status quo in the region's states. In fact, while China has not played a significant military role in the region, it has emerged as a critically important economic partner for many countries. Moreover, its model of state-led economic development, combined with a tightly controlled political system and society is often described as one many MENA governments have found increasingly attractive.⁸⁵

In sum, the engagement of external powers in the MENA is still seen as critically important in shaping order and stability in the region, but within the context of a more diverse set of actors seeking to influence developments, thereby adding to the complexity of the regional strategic landscape.

4. 2. 3. 2. The Organisation of Regional Order

The literature about the MENA's regional order — covering both the period studied in this thesis, and the preceding decades — generally concludes that it has been un conducive to stability, and characterised by competition, conflict, low levels of intra-regional trade, and ineffective regional institutions.⁸⁶ This is

⁸³ See for example: Cinzia Bianco, "A Gulf Apart: How Europe Can Gain Influence with the Gulf Cooperation Council," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020); Tobias Borck, "Germany's Middle Ostpolitik: No Longer on the Sidelines," *RUSI Newsbrief* 35, no. 1 (2015), 5-7; Judy Dempsey, "Europe's Absence in the Middle East," *Carnegie Europe*, 26 June 2019, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/79382>. [accessed 23 October 2019]; Saul Kelly and Gareth Stansfield, "A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf," *RUSI Briefing Paper* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2013); Barah Mikail, "France: The Active Pragmatist," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, in Kristina Kausch (Madrid, FRIDE, 2015), 129-140; Richard Youngs, "The European Union: Inclusion as Geopolitics," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, in Kristina Kausch (Madrid, FRIDE, 2015), 115-128.

⁸⁴ See for example: Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Fawcett, *International Relations*; Christopher Phillips, "Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis," *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers* 1 (2015), 41-51; Dimitri Trenin, *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020)

⁸⁵ Jonathan Fulton, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2018); Camile Lons et al., "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

⁸⁶ See for example: Louise Fawcett, "Alliances and Regionalism in the Middle East," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 196-217; Hinnebusch, "The Middle East Regional System"; Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Noble, "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System?"; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

echoed in the theory-focused works on regional order discussed in the previous chapter.⁸⁷

However, the literature also contains reminders that assessments about stability can vary depending on which variables are examined and which indicators are prioritised. The discourse about the region's borders and state system provides an illustrative example of this. According to a widely held view the MENA's international borders, many drawn by external powers in the early 20th century, are a source of endemic instability in the region.⁸⁸ The 1916 British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement has become synonymous with a notion that the genesis of the regional state system was artificial and externally imposed, bearing little relation to historic and demographic realities on the ground. Governments and non-state actors across the region are commonly understood as engaged in resulting battle to contain and/or instrumentalise trans- and sub-national identities to maintain or gain political power; and bilateral and multilateral disputes over borders have led to numerous latent and violent conflicts (most prominently the Arab-Israeli Wars). Yet, some scholars also highlight that from a different, long-term perspective, this state system has been remarkably durable. Most borders have remained unchanged; and when the Arab-Israeli Wars are excluded, there have been few major inter-state wars in which belligerents were actively trying to change their borders (exceptions are the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in 1990).⁸⁹

Malley identifies a central paradox at the heart of questions about the MENA's regional order. He argues that the region "functions as a unified space," in which language, religion, ethnicity and other factors bind people together across borders and "developments anywhere in the region can have ripple effects

⁸⁷ Including: Ayoob, "From Regional System to Regional Society"; Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*; Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers and Security"; Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

⁸⁸ For example: Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany, "Introduction: Foreign Policies of Arab States," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds. Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 1-7; Hinnebusch, "The Middle East Regional System"; Toby Matthiesen, "Transnational Identities after the Arab Uprisings," in *The Gulf Monarchies Beyond the Arab Spring*, eds. Luigi Narbone and Martin Lestra (Florence: European University Institute, 2015), 32-37; Janice G. Stein, "The Security Dilemma in the Middle East: A Prognosis for the Decade Ahead," in *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*, eds. Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble and Rex Brynen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 56-75.

⁸⁹ Including: James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012); James Barr, "The Divisive Line: The Birth and Long Life of the Sykes-Picot Agreement," in *Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East*, eds. Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson. (London: Profile Books, 2015), 33-48; G. H. Blake, "International Boundaries and Territorial Stability in the Middle East: An Assessment," *GeoJournal* 28, no 3 (1993), 365-373. For historical context see: Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*; Rogan, *The Arabs*.

everywhere.” Simultaneously, he notes, the MENA ranks amongst the economically “least integrated areas of the world,” and its regional institutions — as far as they exist — are dysfunctional.⁹⁰ The literature supports this assessment. As noted above, ideational factors are commonly seen as central to the MENA’s international relations; and the Arab Uprisings are often cited as an example of how political events in one country can affect the wider region.⁹¹ Authors covering the region’s political economy commonly suggest that economic integration could be a catalyst for stability, but note that regional trade flows have long been anaemic; as of the late 2010s, most saw only minor signs of improvement.⁹² For decades, wealthy Arab states in the Gulf have supported the economies of poorer neighbours (with financial support or through remittances from expatriate workers). But towards the end of the 2010s, there was a growing notion that lower oil prices, the global energy transition, and needs to diversify their own economies would reduce their ability and willingness to continue to do so in years to come.⁹³

Meanwhile, the MENA’s regional institutional structure has long been regarded as weak. None of the existing institutions includes the region’s three non-Arab states Israel, Iran and Turkey. The Arab League, one of the world’s older regional organisations, is generally regarded as a forum states have used to defend their sovereignty, rather than advance regional integration.⁹⁴ Until the 2010s, the GCC has often been seen as a moderately successful model for regional cooperation, albeit persistently hampered by the concerns of its smaller

⁹⁰ Malley, “The Unwanted Wars.”

⁹¹ See for example: Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*; Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*.

⁹² See for example: Bernard Hoekman, “Intra-Regional Trade: Potential Catalyst for Growth in the Middle East,” *MEI Policy Paper* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 2016); Omer Karasapan, “MENA’s Economic Integration in an Era of Fragmentation,” *Brookings*, 7 May 2019, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/05/07/menas-economic-integration-in-an-era-of-fragmentation/>. [accessed 23 May 2019]; Nasser Saidi and Athira Prasad, “Background Note: Trends in Trade and Investment Policies in the MENA Region,” in *MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme*, ed. MENA-OECD Working Group on Investment and Trade (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018), available at: <http://www.oecd.org/mena/competitiveness/WGTI2018-Trends-Trade-Investment-Policies-MENA-Nasser-Saidi.pdf> [accessed 15 April 2019]; Robert Springborg, *Political Economies of the Middle East and North Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

⁹³ See for example: Michele Dunne, ed., *As Gulf Donors Shift Priorities, Arab States Search for Aid* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020); Nader Kabbani and Nejla Ben Mimoune, “Economic Diversification in the Gulf: Time to Redouble Efforts,” *Brookings*, 31 January 2021, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/economic-diversification-in-the-gulf-time-to-redouble-efforts/>. [accessed 23 February 2021].

⁹⁴ See for example: Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*; Fawcett, “Alliances and Regionalism”; Hinnebusch, *The International Politics*.

member states about Saudi domination.⁹⁵ However, disputes between its members in the years following the Arab Uprisings — reaching its climax in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain's (joined by Egypt) attempt to politically and economically isolate Qatar in the Gulf Crisis from 2017-2021 — have raised doubts about the organisation's future.⁹⁶ Brief moments of coordination amongst Arab states in 2011 that led to GCC and Arab League support for the NATO-led intervention in Libya and the suspension of Syria from the Arab League led Lynch and others to suggest that more cooperative regional order could emerge.⁹⁷ A few years later, however, Lynch concluded that the region had instead entered an era of "new Arab wars"⁹⁸ — the notion that is at the centre of the above outlined New Middle East Wars literature. There have been some attempts during the 2010s to create new institutional structures, including the USA's Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) proposal and the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) launched by the Saudi government (and including states outside the MENA). Initial assessments of these initiatives, however, are sceptical of their prospects.⁹⁹

The MENA's low levels of economic and institutional regional integration (both factors the conceptual literature about regional order reviewed in previous chapter associates with systems more likely to be conducive the stability) mean that much of the contemporary discourse about the region's order focuses on issues related to realist notions of the distribution of power and patterns of

⁹⁵ See for example: Abdulla Baabood, "Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (London: Routledge, 2005), 145-73; Ehteshami, "GCC Foreign Policy"; Fawcett, "Alliances and Regionalism"; Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*.

⁹⁶ See for example: Abdulla Baabood, "The Future of the GCC Amid the Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 161-78; Michael Stephens, "What Will Become of the GCC?" *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 5 February 2021, available at: <https://agsiw.org/what-will-become-of-the-gcc/>. [accessed 10 February 2021]; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Exclusionary Turn in GCC Politics." *Arab Center Washington DC*, 21 August 2018, available at: http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-exclusionary-turn-in-gcc-politics/. [accessed 27 September 2019].

⁹⁷ See for example: Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*. See also: Florence Gaub, "From Doha with Love: Gulf Foreign Policy in Libya," *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers 1* (2015), 52-58; Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*; Mervat Rishmawi, "The League of Arab States in the Wake of the 'Arab Spring'," (Cairo: Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2013).

⁹⁸ Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*.

⁹⁹ On MESA see: Baabood, "The Future of the GCC"; Yoel Guzansky and Michael Kobi, "Establishing an Arab Nato: Vision Versus Reality," *INSS Insight* 1107, 15 November 2018, available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/establishing-arab-nato-vision-versus-reality/> [accessed 24 October 2019]; Hassan Hassan, "The Arab Alliance is a Circular Firing Squad," *Foreign Policy*, 3 June 2019, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/03/the-arab-alliance-is-a-circular-firing-squad/>. [accessed 23 October 2019]. On the IMCTC see: Ramy Aziz, "The Purpose of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Military Coalition," *Washington Institute*, 4 February 2016, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/purpose-saudi-arabias-islamic-military-coalition>. [accessed 23 October 2019]; Imad K. Harb, "Missing Considerations of the Counterterrorism Alliance," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 29 November 2017, available at: http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/missing-considerations-of-the-counterterrorism-alliance/. [accessed 23 October 2019].

alignment and enmity. Much of this discourse, particularly with regard to how the region's states (and non-state actors) have formed often fluid and transient alliances and coalitions during the 2010s is captured in writings on the New Middle East Wars cited above. Scholars have generally identified three main camps — one led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, another formed around Turkey, Qatar and affiliates of the MB, and one consisting of Iran and its state- and non-state partners in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

In more general terms, and certainly in publications predating the 2010s, there is a tendency in the literature to examine the distribution of power amongst the MENA's states through the lens of a region divided into two categories: the Arab core, and the three non-Arab states Israel, Iran and Turkey. Amongst the Arab states, the scholarly consensus sees power has having shifted from the traditional leaders, such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq, to the wealthy Gulf monarchies, specifically Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. This process is often understood as having begun in the 1960s and 70s (following the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War and the rise in global oil prices), but having accelerated in the 21st century, culminating in what several scholars have termed “the Gulf moment” in the MENA's international relations after the Arab Uprisings.¹⁰⁰ The literature tracing Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's rise to the status of the region's most active Arab regional powers is reviewed in more detail in the next chapter.

Besides the three Gulf monarchies, the region's non-Arab states — and particularly Iran and Turkey — are commonly seen as the regional powers with the most effectual regional policies during the 2010s.¹⁰¹ As noted above, even before the Arab Uprisings, there had been a sense in the literature, summarised by Noble in the mid-2000s, that Israel, Iran and Turkey were the MENA's strongest powers — with the most capable armed forces and sustainable and/or promising economies.¹⁰² Yet, Noble also highlights inherent limitations facing all three countries in being recognised as regional leaders, including their status as non-Arab states in a majority-Arab region, historical baggage, religious

¹⁰⁰ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment in Contemporary Arab History* [لحظة الخليج في التاريخ العربي المعاصر] (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2018); Florence Gaub, *The Gulf Moment: Arab Relations since 2011* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015); Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*.

¹⁰¹ See for example: Ghattas, *Black Wave*; Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*; Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*.

¹⁰² Noble, “From Arab System to Middle Eastern System?” See also: Hinnebusch, “The Middle East Regional System”; Valbjorn and Bank, “The New Arab Cold War.”

differences, and the fact that other states in the region have long perceived them as major opponents and/or threats.

The literature generally describes Israel's role in the MENA of the 21st century as that of a status quo power. Many of its main security interests — particularly with regard to Iran and political Islam — are seen as overlapping significantly with those of many Arab governments, including those in the Gulf monarchies.¹⁰³ The 2020 Abraham Accords, and especially the bilateral relationship between Israel and the UAE, are seen as manifestations of this.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Israel's position in the MENA is also still seen as defined by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinian cause, while no longer the dominant political issue in regional politics, is still regarded as something regional governments have to at least pay lip service to in their foreign policies, and some state- and non-state actors (especially Islamist groups) can rally around to garner popular legitimacy.¹⁰⁵

Iran, meanwhile, is widely seen as one of the most active regional powers in the MENA, with ambitions to expand its influence in countries across the region. Much of the literature about Iran's role in the MENA focuses on its rivalry with Saudi Arabia; its hostile relationships with the USA and Israel; its backing of the governments in Iraq and Syria; and its support for a wide array of mainly Shia non-state actors and militias (including Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen). Authors such as Kissinger describe Iran as a revisionist power seeking a position of regional hegemony in the MENA's changing regional order.¹⁰⁶ Others explain Iran's regional behaviour as driven by the need to secure itself against the USA, Israel and several Arab states' desires to isolate and change the regime in Tehran.¹⁰⁷ For the purpose of this thesis, the most important point to note is that Iran features heavily in the threat perceptions of many Arab countries, especially the

¹⁰³ See for example: Ian Black, "Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation" *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (London: Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019); Natan Sachs and Kevin Huggard, "Israel in the Middle East: The Next Two Decades" *Foreign Policy at Brookings* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ Norlen and Sinai, "The Abraham Accords."

¹⁰⁵ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Karsh, *The Tail Wags the Dog*; Asher Susser, "Israel's Place in a Changing Regional Order (1948–2013)," *Israel Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014), 218-238.

¹⁰⁶ Kissinger, *World Order*.

¹⁰⁷ For example: Vali Nasr, "Iran Among the Ruins: Tehran's Advantage in a Turbulent Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2018), 108-118.

Gulf states, who consider it in their vital national interest to counter Iran's activities in the region.¹⁰⁸

Finally, Turkey is regarded as having become an increasingly active power in the MENA since the turn of the 21st century. In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, in particular, much attention has focused on Turkey's support for Islamist political groups such as the MB in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia. As these groups achieved electoral successes, the "Turkish Model" was frequently described as a possible blueprint for how democracy and political Islam could be reconciled. In the years since, the focus has shifted to Turkey's increasingly direct interventions in the Syrian war, both against the regime in Damascus and, especially, against Kurdish forces (including in Iraq), and in Libya.¹⁰⁹

In general, and in line with the above described model of the Middle Eastern Cold War, there is a sense that these six actors — the three Gulf states and the three non-Arab states — are all seeking to influence the regional order according to their own, frequently directly opposing interests. Phillips' study of the international aspects of the Syrian civil war offers an insightful overview of how this dynamic has spawned often very temporary and sometimes seemingly incoherent confrontations and alignments between them.¹¹⁰

4. 2. 3. 3. State-Level Order

The Arab Uprisings have reinvigorated scholarly debates about the stability of the MENA's Arab states. Gause's article titled "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability" summarises how the Uprisings undermined a number of the field's long-held assumptions about the internal dynamics of states in the region.¹¹¹ These had included assessments that most Arab regimes had a firm grip on political and economic power, often protected by large security services; and that Arab populations were politically

¹⁰⁸ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*.

¹⁰⁹ Soner Cagaptay and Marc Sievers, "Turkey and Egypt's Great Game in the Middle East: The Regional Powerhouses Square Off," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 March 2015, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-03-08/turkey-and-egypts-great-game-middle-east>. [accessed 14 August 2019]; Jalel Harchaoui, "Why Turkey Intervened in Libya," *The East Mediterranean and Regional Security: A Transatlantic Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020); Jason Pack and Wolfgang Puztai, "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli," *MEI Policy Paper*, (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 2020); Cale Salih, "Turkey, the Kurds and the Fight Against Islamic State," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015); Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

¹¹¹ Gregory F. Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011), 81-90.

apathetic and/or too scared to rebel.¹¹² Regime stability, defined by Selvik and Stenslie as a regime's ability to maintain "its characteristic features — values, norms, and authority structures — over a certain period of time,"¹¹³ appeared to be a hallmark of MENA politics. Indeed, apart from rare exceptions (Lebanon's fractious politics, Yemen's unification in 1990, and US-forced regime change in Iraq), Arab regimes had remained mostly unchanged between 1970-2010: in four decades, power was only transferred from fathers to sons (in monarchies and in Syria), or from one regime member to another (e.g. in Egypt, Tunisia or Algeria).

In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, agreement spread that past regime longevity and lack of significant political change are at best poor and short-term indicators of states' stability.¹¹⁴ There is a notion that the signs pointing to the fragility of many Arab states were there all along. They were captured, for example, in the 2002 Arab Human Development Report,¹¹⁵ and highlighted in the discourse surrounding US and European democratisation agendas in the region, which included arguments that regime stability came at the cost of political and socio-economic stagnation and ruling elites' diminishing popular legitimacy — both regarded as drivers of medium- and long-term instability.¹¹⁶ Since 2011, scholars have concluded that the security services of many Arab states were in fact weak, divided, and/or more focused on self-preservation than the protection of their political masters;¹¹⁷ liberalising reforms and macro-economic growth in Egypt or Tunisia had benefitted crony-capitalist elites and cemented patronage networks, but worsened inequality and left behind majorities of increasingly desperate and disillusioned populations;¹¹⁸ young people across the region were attaining higher levels of education, but did not

¹¹² See for example: Danahar, *The New Middle East*; Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*; Peters, *Promoting Democracy*.

¹¹³ Selvik and Stenslie, *Stability and Change*.

¹¹⁴ Inge Fryklund, "Rethinking Stability," *Small Wars Journal*, 19 February 2014, available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/rethinking-stability>. [accessed 8 April 2021]; Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring"; Colin H. Kahl and Marc Lynch, "US Strategy after the Arab Uprisings: Toward Progressive Engagement," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2013), 39-60.

¹¹⁵ United Nations Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2002).

¹¹⁶ Including: Covarrubias and Lansford, *Strategic Interests in the Middle East*; Korany, Noble and Brynen, *The Many Faces of National Security*; Selvik and Stenslie, *Stability and Change*; Richard Youngs and Tamara Cofman-Wittes, "Europe, the United States and Middle Eastern Democracy," in *Promoting Democracy and the Rule of Law: American and European Strategies*, ed. Thomas Risse and Michael McFaul (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2009).

¹¹⁷ Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring"; Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings*; Springborg, *Arab Militaries*.

¹¹⁸ Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring"; Peters, *Promoting Democracy*.

see economic opportunities, all while emerging communication technologies gave them new ways to connect and organise and reduced regimes' abilities to control information.¹¹⁹

Yet, scholars have also sought to explain why certain Arab regimes were able to weather the Arab Uprisings better than others. Some argue that the Arab monarchies benefitted from a different, historically rooted form of legitimacy that the region's presidents lacked, while also acknowledging that many of the surviving regimes had been rich enough to pay off their citizens.¹²⁰ Heydemann and Leenders add that Arab regimes also learned from each other and adapted accordingly, leading them to pre-emptively placate their populations with financial handouts, appeal to the strategic interests of external powers (e.g. the Syrian regime turning to Russia for assistance), and attempt to shift the narrative about the Uprisings themselves (making it about sectarianism or terrorism, rather than political or socio-economic grievances).¹²¹ Finally, Lynch argues that the collapse of Syria, Libya or Yemen into civil war may have had a deterrent effect on the populations of other countries, restoring some of the fear of confronting authoritarian regimes.¹²²

A significant subsection of the contemporary Middle East Studies literature focuses on the relationship between Islam and politics and how it is affecting regional affairs and the order and stability of Arab states, in particular. As noted above, political Islam has widely been regarded as the key political and transnational identity challenge to the power of governments and states across the Arab world since the decline of Arabism in the 1960s and 70s.¹²³ The sense

¹¹⁹ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*; Curtis R. Ryan, "Inter-Arab Relations and the Regional System," in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 110-124.

¹²⁰ See for example: Claudia Derichs and Thomas Demmelhuber, "Monarchies and Republics, State and Regime, Durability and Fragility in View of the Arab Spring," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014), 180-194; Victor Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs," *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012), 707-722; Luigi Narbone and Martin Lestra, *The Gulf Monarchies Beyond the Arab Spring* (Florence: European University Institute, 2015)

¹²¹ Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Counterrevolution," in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch (New York, Columbia University Press, 2014), 76-92.

¹²² Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*.

¹²³ See: Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Explaining International Politics in the Middle East: The Struggle of Regional Identity and Systemic Structure," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman. (London: Routledge, 2005), 243-255; Matthiesen, "Transnational Identities After the Arab Uprisings." However, Gause (2011) and Lynch (2012) convincingly argue that a shared sense of Arab identity contributed to the spread of protests during the Arab Uprisings, and notions of Arab solidarity continue to bind populations across the region together (especially over issues such as Palestine and the war in Syria); see: Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring"; Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*. Regarding the decline of Arabism see: Fuad Ajami, "The End of Pan-Arabism," *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 2 (1978); Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*

that Islamist groups represent the most potent political opposition in many countries predates the 2010s, with the electoral successes of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front in 1991, the MB in Egypt in 2005, and Hamas in Gaza in 2006 often cited as illustrative examples.¹²⁴ The post-2011 election victories of the Tunisian El-Nahda and the Egyptian MB, and the influential role played by Islamist groups — political and armed — in Syria, Libya and Yemen further cemented this conclusion. Yet, focusing especially on the MB in Egypt, the literature also highlights that Islamist rule did not bring stability; governance failures and authoritarian measures spurred popular opposition, which combined with resistance from state institutions (especially the military and security services) unwilling to relinquish power.¹²⁵

The literature shows that Arab regimes' approaches to the challenge they perceive from political Islam have always varied. Identified strategies to deal with Islamist groups seeking change primarily through political means include: accommodation and cooption in political systems by allowing participation, however restricted, in parliamentary elections; attempts to counter politically ambitious movements like the MB by promoting religiously conservative but politically loyal groups (e.g. so-called quietist Salafis); and securitised crackdowns, usually under the guise of counter-terrorism measures, and often wrapped in narratives that tie such domestic measures to international counter-terrorism efforts.¹²⁶ With regard to Islamist groups that advocate and employ violence, including jihadist groups with international agendas such as AQ and Daesh, approaches have mostly been dominated by the use of military force, frequently in coordination with external powers.¹²⁷ In some countries, this has been accompanied by deradicalisation and reintegration programmes.¹²⁸ Scholars have also documented a number of cases in which Arab regimes have openly or covertly backed armed Islamist groups in other countries to achieve

¹²⁴ Carothers, *US Democracy Promotion*; Peters, *Promoting Democracy*; Youngs and Cofman-Wittes, "Europe, the United States and Middle Eastern Democracy."

¹²⁵ Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: From Opposition to Power* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).

¹²⁶ Good examples of this vast literature include: Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*; Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); Hamid, *Temptations of Power*; Shadi Hamid and William McCants, eds., *Rethinking Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

¹²⁷ Counter-terrorism as an area of cooperation with the USA and other external powers features in accounts of many Arab countries' foreign policies, including those surveyed in: Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

¹²⁸ See for example: Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

foreign political objectives (e.g. the Mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and elements of the Syrian opposition in the 2010s).¹²⁹ Throughout, Arab rulers are generally seen as careful to demonstrate their own Islamic credentials, while maintaining close relationships with — and/or control over — state-sanctioned clerical establishments. This is perhaps most obvious in the cases of Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan, for whose monarchs their positions as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and descendants of the Prophet, respectively, are central to their claim to religious as well as political legitimacy.¹³⁰

The discourse about political Islam as a factor impacting the order and stability of Arab states also extends to, and often subsumes, debates about the prominent role played by non-state actors in the region, many — though not all — of which are seen as adhering to Islamist ideologies. For this thesis, two aspects of these debates are particularly relevant: Firstly, in several Arab countries, non-state actors are regarded as assuming state-like functions ranging from the delivery of social services to the provision of security. Non-state actors are therefore regarded as potentially undermining the legitimacy of existing political structures and — in the most severe cases — as contesting a state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.¹³¹ Hezbollah is frequently cited as an illustrative example of a non-state actor with welfare delivery and military capabilities rivalling its home state Lebanon, and that even has its own foreign policy, demonstrated in the 2006 war against Israel and its involvement in the Syrian war.¹³² Secondly, non-state actors are seen as favoured partners in the regional foreign policies of various states — both in the region and beyond. Iran's relationship with Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen are an example of this,¹³³ as are the ties

¹²⁹ For examples in the 20th century see: Kepel, *Jihad*. For a detailed study of the evolution of Islamist groups involved in the Syrian war, including their linkages to state actors, see: Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst & Co, 2015).

¹³⁰ Hamid and McCants, *Rethinking Political Islam*.

¹³¹ See for example: Natasha Ezrow, *Global Politics and Violent Non-state Actors* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2017); Hamid, *Temptations of Power*; Hamid and McCants, *Rethinking Political Islam*; Klejda Mulaj, *Violent Non-state Actors in World Politics* (London: C Hurst & Co, 2010); Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood*; Murat Yesiltas and Tuncay Kardas, eds., *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹³² For detailed studies about Hezbollah see: Aurelie Daher, *Hezbollah: Mobilisation and Power*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹³³ See for example: Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, "The View from Tehran: Iran's Militia Doctrine," (London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2021); IISS, "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

between the USA and European countries with Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria,¹³⁴ and between numerous regional and external powers and militias in Libya.¹³⁵ Scholars often warn that while these linkages are important in shaping conflict dynamics in individual countries and the region, these non-state actors should not be reduced to the status of mere proxies so as not to overlook their own specific agendas.¹³⁶ Moreover, there is growing awareness that even in settings where non-state actors have been crucial to achieving short-term objectives, they can become long-term impediments to stability as they continue to challenge and rival state authority. This is apparent in the cases of Kurdish groups seeking to leverage military achievements against Daesh in arguments for greater political autonomy;¹³⁷ and the plethora of Libyan militias that grew out of the internationally backed rebellion against the Gaddafi regime and remain an obstacle to efforts to reconstitute the Libyan state.¹³⁸

In general, the literature contains no comprehensive theory as to what makes the systems of order in some Arab countries potentially more conducive to stability than those in others. However, there is consensus that the socio-economic legitimacy issues that contributed to the fall of several governments in the early 2010s continue to remain relevant at the end of the decade — including in the wealthy Gulf monarchies¹³⁹ — and may well resurface in future revolutionary movements; and that political Islam and the military capabilities of non-state actors remain essential factors in this. In fact, some referred to the waves of protests in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan in 2018-2020 as “the New Arab Uprisings.”¹⁴⁰ A decade after the initial Uprisings there is a general notion that neither authoritarian control and the forceful preservation of the status quo, nor revolutionary regime change are the basis for stability; and that

¹³⁴ Numerous studies cover the role of Kurdish groups in the fight against Daesh and Kurdish efforts to secure autonomy and/or independence; see for example: Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

¹³⁵ See for example: Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020); Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

¹³⁶ See for example the studies referenced in the previous three footnotes.

¹³⁷ Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*.

¹³⁸ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*; Wehrey, *The Burning Shores*.

¹³⁹ Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London, Hurst & Co, 2012); Christopher Davidson, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism: Statecraft and Authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE* (London: Hurst & Co, 2021).

¹⁴⁰ Georges Fahmi, “Five Lessons from the New Arab Uprisings,” *Chatham House*, 12 November 2019, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/11/five-lessons-new-arab-uprisings>. [accessed 10 January 2020]. See also: Peter Bartu, “The New Arab Uprisings: How the 2019 Trajectory Differs from the 2011 Legacy?” (Doha: Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2020); Marina Ottaway and David B. Ottaway, “The New Arab Uprisings: Lessons from the Past,” *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020), 30-40.

there is no certainty as to what kind of domestic order can be regarded as most conducive to stability in the MENA.

4. 3. Conclusion

This chapter sets the scene for, and facilitates the analysis in the following chapters in two ways: The first part refines the thesis' analytical framework and anchors it in the Middle East Studies literature. Common approaches to studying the region's international relations and the foreign policies of its member states provide the framework with a structure that allows for systematic analysis and comparison. The second part traces the contemporary debates in the literature that are of particular relevance to the thesis thematic focus on stability. It shows that prevailing systems of order and disorder in the MENA are generally seen as having fomented and perpetuated instability. At the level of individual Arab states, authoritarian orders dominate, but are called into question by the political and socio-economic weaknesses of states exposed by the Arab Uprisings, and challenged by political Islam and non-state actors. The regional order is generally understood to be characterised by balance-of-power competition between shifting alliances of regional powers often summarised in the paradigm of the New Middle Eastern Cold War, while economic and institutional integration is limited. Finally, while external powers have long played decisive roles in regional affairs, in the 21st century dynamics are in flux, with uncertainty surrounding the future level of engagement in the region by the USA, in particular.

In general, the Middle East Studies literature in the 21st century, and in particular in the decade after the Arab Uprisings, revolves around a notion of great uncertainty and a region in transformation. External and regional powers, non-state actors, and various political and socio-economic drivers of change interact with one another, leaving questions about the future of systems of order in the region — at all levels — unresolved.

5. Literature Review: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

The Gulf Moment

In the decade following the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar were the Arab states with the most visibly active and consequential foreign policies in the Middle East. This is one of the foundational assumptions of this thesis, which is reflected in the contemporary academic literature and the journalistic and analytical discourse about the region and its international relations. Previous chapters explain how the thesis' analytical framework relates to, and is derived from, the wider Middle East Studies literature, and particularly its subsets focused on international relations and foreign policy. This chapter narrows the focus to the three countries under examination in this thesis: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. It reviews the arguments and findings other scholars and analysts have contributed to the field, particularly over the past decade, and thereby seeks to achieve two main objectives:

First, it locates the thesis, and specifically its three case studies, in the existing literature and further refines the contribution it seeks to make to the field. Second, it seeks to provide a foundation for analysis in the following chapters. As noted in Chapter 2, the thesis has an intentionally broad focus, both in terms of geography and time, seeking to draw conclusions about the three countries' foreign policies towards the whole MENA region and across the decade of the 2010s. In parts, it therefore has to rely and build on the work of others who have contributed much more detailed studies and accounts of the three countries' policies towards specific countries or topics. This chapter serves as a source of reference to their insights. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that this literature review is by no means comprehensive; the field is too large, and the number of important scholars and analysts too great, to be covered fully in the space available here.

The chapter proceeds in four parts: The first section provides a general overview of the rapidly growing body of literature focused on the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar; sections two, three and four summarise the content of the literature devoted to each of the three countries in turn.

Finally, the conclusion briefly outlines the contribution the thesis aims to make to the literature.

5. 1. The Literature: A Rapidly Expanding Field

The literature focused on the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar has expanded substantially since 2011. Academics, policy analysts and journalists alike identified the three Gulf monarchies as the Arab states most openly and actively engaged in shaping political and societal developments, conflicts and general regional dynamics following the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings. A number of new and updated survey works of the region's international relations, for example by Ehteshami and Hinnebusch,¹ Fawcett,² Kamrava,³ Legrenzi,⁴ and Ulrichsen⁵ (many containing chapters by a much larger group of scholars), allow the conclusion that Saudi Arabia, and certainly the UAE and Qatar, have become more prominent and consequential actors in regional affairs than in previous decades. In more journalistic publications, like those by Danahar⁶ and Worth,⁷ the three also appear as the most important Arab protagonists, often viewed in the context of a multi-faceted competition with the non-Arab regional powers Iran and Turkey. The same is true for various book-length studies and accounts of the post-2011 developments in other individual countries in the region, including Egypt,⁸ Libya⁹ and Syria.¹⁰

As suggested in previous chapters, the advent of this “Gulf Moment” in the MENA's international relations — dubbed thus by Abdulla¹¹ (in Arabic) and

¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014).

² Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³ Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁴ Matteo Legrenzi, ed., *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ed., *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶ Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

⁷ Robert Worth, *A Rage for Order: The MENA in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

⁸ H. A. Hellyer, *A Revolution Undone: Egypt's Road Beyond Revolt* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017); David D. Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁹ Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

¹⁰ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (London: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment in Contemporary Arab History* [لحظة الخليج في التاريخ العربي المعاصر] (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2018).

Gaub¹² (in English) — was the result of a confluence of various factors. The regional order, already shaken by developments such as the US-led invasion of Iraq, was thrown into flux by the Arab Uprisings. In a changing global environment, the USA and its western European allies — the Gulf states' closest international partners — were unwilling and/or unable to dictate the path of change in the region beyond some limited interventions. In the previous decade, the Gulf states themselves had amassed various tools of influence, ranging from economic wealth to diplomatic weight, military capabilities and media reach. In the wake of the Uprisings, they saw both the need to protect their regional interests, but also the opportunities to advance their regional agendas.¹³

There are a number of in-depth studies about various aspects of the Gulf states' politics that are of relevance to this thesis. Books such as Lynch's *The New Arab Wars*,¹⁴ which stands representative of the New Middle East Cold War debate outlined in the previous chapter,¹⁵ and Krieg's *Divided Gulf*,¹⁶ which addresses intra-Gulf competition in the wake of the 2017 Gulf Crisis, are examples of this. Other works worth highlighting include, but are not limited to: Miller's overview of the Gulf monarchies' histories;¹⁷ Davidson's critical assessments of the sustainability of the Gulf states' domestic political and socio-economic structures,¹⁸ and Freer's study of their relationships with the MB,¹⁹ which, in turn, is part of a wider debate about the Gulf states' attitudes towards

¹² Florence Gaub, *The Gulf Moment: Arab Relations since 2011* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015).

¹³ See all the above cited works, as well as contributions such as: Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Responding to an Assertive Gulf," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015); Kristina Kausch, ed., *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East* (Madrid: FRIDE, 2015); Karen E. Young, "The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC," *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series 2* (2013); Karen E. Young, "Foreign Policy Analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Breaking Black Boxes and Explaining New Interventions," *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers 1* (2015): 4-12.

¹⁴ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the MENA* (New York, Public Affairs, 2016).

¹⁵ Gregory F. Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014); Nabeel A. Khoury, "The Arab Cold War Revisited: The Regional Impact of the Arab Spring," *Middle East Policy Council* 20, no. 2 (2013); Curtis R. Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 42 (2012); Michael Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux," in *Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism*, ed. Thanassis Cambanis (New York: The Century Foundation, 2017); Morten Valbjorn and Adnre Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of MENA Regional Politics," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011), 3-24.

¹⁶ Andreas Krieg, ed., *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁷ Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London, Hurst & Co, 2012); Christopher Davidson, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism: Statecraft and Authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE* (London: Hurst & Co, 2021).

¹⁹ Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

political Islam;²⁰ Hook and Niblock's edited volume on the changing US role in the Gulf region,²¹ which is part of a much wider academic and policy debate about US engagement with the MENA region;²² and Samaan's analysis of how the Gulf states are increasingly seeking to diversify their economic, political and security relations with global powers by building closer ties with China and Russia,²³ which is also part of a growing area of study.²⁴ There are also numerous shorter comparative studies that contrast the diverging foreign policy responses of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar over the decade. This includes publications by Gaub,²⁵ Roberts²⁶ and Ulrichsen,²⁷ for example. This thesis builds on the arguments presented in this field by offering a long-form analysis and comparison of the three Gulf states' regional foreign policies over the span of the full decade.

The entire field of scholarship outlined in the preceding paragraphs — and this thesis — is rooted in ever-expanding sub-bodies of literature that take Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, individually, and their foreign policies in particular, as their respective subject of analysis.

The literature on Saudi Arabia is most extensive, reflecting the kingdom's historical status as a regional power, not least based on its size and location, which makes it the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, and its wealth and global

²⁰ For a selection, see: Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, "Gulf Perspectives on the Muslim Brotherhood," *Brookings*, 9 October 2013, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/gulf-perspectives-on-the-muslim-brotherhood/>. [accessed 15 October 2019]; Christopher Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 71-90; Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?" *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017), 129-53; Guido Steinberg, "Islamism in the Gulf," in *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed., Ana Echagüe (Madrid: FRIDE, 2013), 59-58.

²¹ Steven W. Hook, and Tim Niblock, eds., *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015.

²² Discussions about the evolving US role in the Gulf and the MENA are part of almost every volume exploring the international affairs of the region during the decade, including those cited throughout this and the previous chapter. See for example section 4. 2. 3. 1. The Role of External Powers.

²³ Jean-Loup Samaan, *Strategic Hedging in the Arabian Peninsula*, Whitehall Paper 92, (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2018).

²⁴ For a selection, see: Jonathan Fulton, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2018); Jonathan Fulton and Li-Chen Sim, eds. *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2018); Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia and the Gcc Countries: Hard to Be Friends but Impossible to Remain Foes," in *The Arab States of the Gulf and Brics: New Strategic Partnerships in Politics and Economics*, eds. Tim Niblock, Degang Sun and Alejandra Galindo (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016), 128-53; Camille Lons et al., "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019); Tim Niblock, Talmiz Ahmad, and Degang Sun, eds. *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018; Jean-Marc Rickli, "New Alliances Dynamics in the Gulf and Their Impact on the Small GCC States," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016), 132-50.

²⁵ Florence Gaub, "From Doha with Love: Gulf Foreign Policy in Libya," *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers* 1 (2015), 52-58.

²⁶ David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring," *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017), 544-562.

²⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring," *HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series* 3 (2012).

importance derived from its position as a world-leading oil exporter. In Kerr's *The Arab Cold War*,²⁸ Saudi Arabia is described as the region's leading conservative monarchy resisting Arab nationalism driven by Nasser's Egypt; and a chapter about Saudi Arabia is included in Dessouki and Korany's seminal 1984 survey of Arab states' foreign policies (written by Korany and Baghat).²⁹ During the decade under examination in this thesis, the most detailed overview of Saudi foreign policy is provided in Partrick's *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*.³⁰ Various others have contributed book-length publications that advance the field's general understanding of Saudi history and contemporary politics, and therefore also shed light on Saudi foreign policy. Works by Elliott House,³¹ Lacroix, Haykel and Hegghammer,³² and Aarts and Roelants³³ — all from the first half of the decade — touch on foreign policy, but place it within the context of substantial political and societal changes inside the kingdom, either already taking place or looming on the horizon; Al-Rasheed's edited volume³⁴ and Hubbard's more journalistic account³⁵ centred around the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman do the same for the latter years of the decade, following the transition of power from King Abdullah to King Salman in 2015. Hertog³⁶ and Wald's³⁷ books offer rich analyses of Saudi Arabia's political economy, which, due to the centrality of oil exports in the country's economic development, inevitably has a substantial foreign affairs component to it. Cordesman³⁸ also focuses on the economy, but explicitly links it to national security, both in terms of internal regime security and issues of external defence. Commins' *The Mission and the Kingdom*,³⁹ meanwhile, examines how the relationship between the Saudi state, the ruling family and the country's

²⁸ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

²⁹ Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008).

³⁰ Neil Partrick, ed., *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

³¹ Karen Elliott-House, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines* (New York: Vintage, 2013).

³² Stephane Lacroix, Bernard Haykel and Thomas Hegghammer, eds., *Saudi Arabia in Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³³ Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril* (London: Hurst & Co, 2015).

³⁴ Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst & Co, 2018).

³⁵ Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (London: William Collins, 2020).

³⁶ Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Ellen R. Wald, *Saudi Inc: The Arabian Kingdom's Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019).

³⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

³⁹ David Commins, *The Mission and the Kingdom: Wahhabi Power Behind the Saudi Throne* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

Wahhabi clerical establishment affects Saudi Arabia's internal politics and external posture. Finally, Hiro,⁴⁰ Ghattas⁴¹ and Fraihat⁴² focus on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy within the context of its regional competition with the Islamic Republic of Iran, generally concentrating on recent developments, but tracing the relationship's history over the past half a century. Many of these authors also have various shorter publications to their name, and there are of course dozens of other academics, analysts and journalists who have contributed to the increasingly diverse and nuanced debate about Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the political, economic and social factors shaping it. Perhaps most prominently, this includes Gause,⁴³ one of the most well-established and widely-published authorities on Saudi Arabia's international relations and security concerns, as well several Saudi authors — among them Obaid,⁴⁴ Shihabi⁴⁵ and Al-Tamamy⁴⁶ — whose work is often based on closer professional relationships with the Saudi government than most non-Saudi observers can achieve. Examples of their work, and of others who have not been explicitly named thus far, is cited throughout the latter sections of this chapter.

The sub-bodies of literature about the UAE and Qatar are distinctly smaller. Their foreign relations and security policies, in particular, did not attract much scholarly attention before the beginning of the 21st century. They did not feature in the first (1984) and second (1991) editions of Dessouki and Korany's *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*; the 2008 edition included a chapter about the UAE, but still excluded Qatar.⁴⁷ Neither country was discussed in Ehteshami and Hinnebusch's first edition of *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*

⁴⁰ Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴¹ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020).

⁴² Ibrahim Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

⁴³ For example: Gregory F. Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East," *Council Special Report* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011); Gregory F. Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 185-206; Gregory F. Gause, "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & Co, 2018) 31-43.

⁴⁴ For example: Nawaf Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defence Doctrine" (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, 2014).

⁴⁵ For example: Ali Shihabi, "Saudi Arabia's New Foreign Policy Doctrine," *Arabia Foundation*, 14 December 2017, available at: <https://www.arabiafoundation.org/arabia-comment/saudi-arabias-new-foreign-policy-doctrine/>. [accessed 18 October 2019].

⁴⁶ For example: Saud Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security," in *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, ed. Henner Fuertig (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 191-208.

⁴⁷ Dessouki and Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*.

from 2001, and only Qatar was included in the edition from 2014.⁴⁸ This absence of scholarly examination until the mid/late 2000s, but also the sharp increase in attention given to the UAE and Qatar's foreign policies since, reflects the small sheikhdoms' very recent and dramatic rise from relative obscurity to the status of consequential regional actors.

At the centre of the literature about the UAE is a small number of book-length publications. Al-Mezaini's *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid, Identities and Interests*⁴⁹ and Ulrichsen's *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policymaking*⁵⁰ are the two most detailed studies of foreign policy-making in the UAE to date (certainly in English). Davidson's pre-2011 volumes about Dubai⁵¹ and Abu Dhabi,⁵² respectively, also provide important background about the (mostly) domestic context in which Emirati foreign policy is made. The scope of Abdulla's *The Gulf Moment in Contemporary Arab History*⁵³ is more regional, but the book is particularly valuable for its insights about the UAE, not least due to the author's status as one of the UAE's most prominent political science academics. The books by Emirati think tank director Al-Suwaidi⁵⁴ and diplomat Ghobash⁵⁵ also do not explicitly deal with the UAE's foreign policy, but their discussions of political Islam and Islamist groups in the MENA can nevertheless be regarded as reflections on how the UAE regards these subjects as one of the most important strategic issues it faces in the region. In addition to these books, the following sections of this chapter cite many important journal articles, papers and other publications that have contributed to a better understanding of the UAE's foreign policy, especially since 2011. These include Ibish's detailed study of the UAE's national security strategy,⁵⁶ various articles by Al-Qassimi, offering an Emirati perspective on issues such as the UAE's engagement with

⁴⁸ Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

⁴⁹ Khalid Al-Mezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid, Identities and Interests* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁰ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁵¹ Christopher Davidson, *Dubai: Vulnerability of Success* (London: Hurst & CO, 2008).

⁵² Christopher Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond* (London: Hurst & CO, 2009).

⁵³ Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment*.

⁵⁴ Jamal Al-Suwaidi, *The Mirage* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center For Strategic Studies And Research, 2015).

⁵⁵ Omar Saif Ghobash, *Letters to a Young Muslim* (London: Picador, 2018).

⁵⁶ Hussein Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy* (Washington DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2017).

Egypt's MB and the war in Yemen,⁵⁷ and Roberts' analysis of the UAE as the arguably most effective Arab military power⁵⁸

The most comprehensive accounts of Qatar's foreign policy, and the country's politics more generally, are Roberts' *Qatar: Security the Global Ambitions of a City State*⁵⁹ and Kamrava's *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*.⁶⁰ Fromherz provides a useful history of the small sheikhdom.⁶¹ Finally, Ulrichsen's *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience*⁶² combines an in-depth examination of the Gulf Crisis with an account of Qatar's foreign policy, which was an important factor in motivating Qatar's neighbours to sever ties with Doha in 2017. Roberts, Kamrava and Ulrichsen have also published numerous academic journal articles and other short-form analyses about Qatar — many of which are cited throughout the following sections in this chapter. The same is true for several other authors, including, but not limited to, Freer and her work about Qatar's relationship with the MB,⁶³ and Stephens, whose articles, particularly from the beginning of the 2010s decade, provide detailed commentary and analysis on Qatar's regional activities.⁶⁴

5. 2. Saudi Arabia: Traditional Leader with New Ambition

The literature about Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the MENA during the 2010s splits the decade in two: the first half, until the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, and the second half, shaped by the succession of King Salman and the rapid rise to power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud. It is important to note that scholarly examination of this second period, in particular, remains in its infancy. To date, the most comprehensive accounts of these years

⁵⁷ Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "UAE Security Crackdown: A View from the Emirates," *Al-Monitor*, 18 July 2012, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/the-uae-security-crackdown-a-vie.html#ixzz66KN3NZRp>. [accessed 18 October 2019];

Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "What Intervention in Yemen Means for UAE's National Identity," *Time*, 22 September 2015 available at: <http://time.com/4040220/uae-intervention-in-yemen/>. [accessed 18 October 2019].

⁵⁸ David B. Roberts, "Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World," *Security Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020), 301-334.

⁵⁹ David B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State* (London: Hurst & CO, 2017).

⁶⁰ Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, iBooks, 2015).

⁶¹ Allen James Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

⁶² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020).

⁶³ See sections on Qatar in: Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; 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 (2017), 479-500.

⁶⁴ See for example: Michael Stephens, "The Arab League Actually Does Something," *Foreign Policy*, 27 March 2013, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/27/the-arab-league-actually-does-something/>. [accessed 12 December 2019]; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux."

are contained in Hubbard's *MBS*⁶⁵ and Hope and Scheck's *Blood and Oil*,⁶⁶ both more journalistic than academic portraits of Mohammed bin Salman. Nevertheless, taking stock of the literature that does already exist, it is possible to identify an at least preliminary profile of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the decade after the Arab Uprisings: Saudi Arabia is portrayed as a natural and historic regional power that has adopted an increasingly assertive posture in the MENA, driven by a sense that its biggest rival, Iran, was on the rise and the old regional order unravelling. It did so first reluctantly and gradually, and then, after 2015, more aggressively and with an unapologetic claim to regional leadership.

5. 2. 1. Roots of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

As noted above, Saudi Arabia has always been regarded as being amongst the MENA's preeminent regional powers. Partrick's edited volume *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*⁶⁷ and Gause's chapter on Saudi Arabia in Ehteshami and Hinnebusch's *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*⁶⁸ provide overviews of what are generally seen as the historic pillars of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.

As the region's largest and richest Arab monarchy stretching across most of the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has always been tied to the context of the Arab world. It is portrayed as simultaneously bound by responsibility to Arab causes (e.g. Palestinian statehood), and deriving power from its status as an Arab leader — all while upholding regional norms of state sovereignty in the face of transnational political ideologies like Arabism.⁶⁹ Saudi Arabia's status as host of Islam's holiest sites, together with the much-debated historic relationship between the Al-Saud and the Wahhabi clerical establishment, is seen as a major factor shaping the kingdom's foreign policy in multifaceted ways. Authors describe how this has constrained Saudi foreign policy (e.g. requiring it to balance religious conservatism and close ties with the USA), and given it international influence.⁷⁰ They note, for example, how Saudi

⁶⁵ Hubbard, *MBS*.

⁶⁶ Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck, *Blood and Oil: Mohammed Bin Salman's Ruthless Quest for Global Power* (London: John Murray, 2020).

⁶⁷ Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*.

⁶⁸ Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia."

⁶⁹ See for example: Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*; Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁷⁰ See: Commins, *The Mission and the Kingdom*; Menno Preuschaft, "Islam and Identity in Foreign Policy," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 16-29; Bahgat Korany and Moataz A. Fattah, "Irreconcilable Role-Partners? Saudi Foreign Policy between the Ulama and the US," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds. Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 343-96.

Arabia used its position at the centre of the Muslim world to counter Arabism in the 50s and 60s and communism in the 70s and 80s.⁷¹ Analyses of the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry also touch on this; Fraihat,⁷² Ghattas⁷³ and Hiro⁷⁴ all describe Saudi foreign policy since 1979 as shaped by an effort to promote a conservative, and to some extent overtly sectarian interpretation of Sunni Islam to respond to Iran's claim to lead an Islamic (not just Shia) revolution. Since 2001, at the latest, this has also included debates about Saudi Arabia's role in promoting the sort of religious fundamentalism espoused by jihadi terrorist groups like AQ and Daesh.⁷⁵

Furthermore, the literature emphasises the kingdom's position as a world-leading oil producer and its close relationship with the USA as key aspects of its foreign policy. Publications by Hertog,⁷⁶ Quilliam⁷⁷ and Wald⁷⁸ outline Saudi Arabia's political economy. They focus on domestic politics, but also touch on foreign policy. Being the swing-producer of the world's key energy resource has given Saudi Arabia the financial means and clout to project influence beyond its borders. The oil crisis of 1973 is commonly referenced as demonstrating the power oil has conferred upon Saudi Arabia.⁷⁹ Simultaneously, oil has made Saudi Arabia's security an important factor in the geostrategic considerations of other countries around the world, most importantly the USA. The bilateral relationship with the USA has been a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since the Second World War. The US commitment to Saudi Arabia's security, most clearly articulated in the Carter Doctrine of the 1980s and most obviously demonstrated in the US-led international military effort in the 1990/91 Gulf War is commonly regarded as lying at the heart of the kingdom's national security policy.⁸⁰

In general, the literature describes Saudi Arabia's foreign policy before the Arab Uprisings as relatively cautious and with a preference for using financial,

⁷¹ See also: Toby Matthiesen, "Saudi Arabia and the Cold War," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & CO, 2018), 217-33.

⁷² Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia*.

⁷³ Ghattas, *Black Wave*.

⁷⁴ Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World*.

⁷⁵ Commins, *The Mission and the Kingdom*.

⁷⁶ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*.

⁷⁷ Neil Quilliam, "Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Oil," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 30-51.

⁷⁸ Wald, *Saudi Inc*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia."

diplomatic and cultural-religiously derived means of influence, ideally behind the scenes. Occupied first and foremost with regime preservation, Saudi Arabia is regarded as engaged in a complex effort of omni-balancing between internal and external factors: domestic pressures to sustain economic development and satisfy various constituencies, including the religious establishment; the pressures, responsibilities and opportunities for influence deriving from its status as a leader of the Arab and Islamic worlds and globally important energy producer; and the close relationship with, and dependency on, the USA for its security. Finally, it is important to note that many authors stress that by 2011 Saudi Arabia had already grown increasingly concerned about what it perceived as a shift in regional politics in favour of Iran and — in line with a zero-sum understanding of regional affairs commonly attributed to Saudi Arabia and other MENA states — to the detriment of Saudi Arabia's interests. From Riyadh's perspective, Tehran was dominating post-2003 Iraq and gaining influence in the Arab world by presenting itself as the leader of an anti-US and Israel axis of resistance in the region.⁸¹

5. 2. 2. 2011-2015: The Arab Uprisings and their Aftermath

Covering Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Uprisings, some authors, including Al-Rasheed⁸² and Steinberg,⁸³ have described the kingdom as a counter-revolutionary power intent on restoring the status quo. Others — Al-Tamamy,⁸⁴ Gause⁸⁵ and Echague,⁸⁶ for example — acknowledge that Saudi Arabia sought to prevent, manage and roll back some of the revolutionary changes in the region, but highlight that it also embraced change in some countries, most notably in Syria. Besides this debate, there is agreement, including amongst the scholars named above, about many of the key aspects characterising Saudi Arabia's post-2011 policies: The first priority was to prevent unrest at home. The government increased domestic spending to secure the

⁸¹ Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring"; Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia"; Guido Steinberg, "Anfuehrer der Gegenrevolution: Saudi Arabien und der Arabische Fruehling," (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2014); Valbjorn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War."

⁸² Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, eds. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst and Company, 2017), 143-58.

⁸³ Steinberg, "Anfuehrer der Gegenrevolution."

⁸⁴ Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

⁸⁵ Gregory F. Gause, "Is Saudi Arabia Really Counter-Revolutionary," *POMEPS Briefings* 5 (2011), 7-9; Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East"; Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia."

⁸⁶ Ana Echagüe, "Saudi Arabia: Emboldened yet Vulnerable," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid: FRIDE, 2015), 77-88.

goodwill of its citizens,⁸⁷ and repressed any form of dissent, particularly in the Shia-majority Eastern Province.⁸⁸ Regionally, Saudi Arabia sought to avert and manage crises in other Arab states, while growing concerned about what it saw as the continuous and malign spread of Iranian influence.⁸⁹ Throughout, Saudi Arabia perceived the USA as abandoning its regional partners and historic responsibilities for maintaining the regional order.⁹⁰

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy during the initial months of the Arab Uprisings is described as having been focused on securing the survival of the governments in the GCC, and the region's other monarchies in Jordan and Morocco. Riyadh led GCC efforts to provide economic assistance to Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Morocco, and even suggested inviting the latter two to join the regional body;⁹¹ Al-Tamamy explains why this proposal was short-lived.⁹² In March 2011, Saudi troops formed the main contingent of a force sent to help suppress the popular uprising in Bahrain, which Saudi Arabia saw as influenced by Iran.⁹³ Saudi Arabia also led the GCC initiative to contain the brewing civil war in Yemen and facilitate a political transition.⁹⁴

Various authors describe how beyond its immediate neighbourhood, and over the following years, Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Uprisings and their aftermath differed from country to country. It allowed deposed Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to seek exile in Saudi Arabia, but did not try to significantly influence Tunisia's post-revolutionary political transition.⁹⁵ In Libya, it backed the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, a long-time foe of Saudi Arabia, but also did not become actively involved, neither in the NATO-led intervention,

⁸⁷ Gause "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges."

⁸⁸ Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. iBooks, 2013).

⁸⁹ Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World*.

⁹⁰ Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia and the USA," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 358-73.

⁹¹ Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring"; Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East"; Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia"; Steinberg, "Anfuehrer der Gegenrevolution."

⁹² Saud Al-Tamamy, "GCC Membership Expansion: Possibilities And Obstacles," *Dossiers* (Doha: Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 2015).

⁹³ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain: What One Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran," *World Affairs* 174, no. 6 (2012), 74-84; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*; Jean-Francois Sez nec, "Saudi Arabia Strikes Back: The House of Saud's Intervention in Bahrain Is a Slap in The Face of the United States, and a Setback for Peace on the Island," *POMEPS Briefings* 5, (2011), 27-29; Steinberg, "Anfuehrer der Gegenrevolution"; Young, "The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC."

⁹⁴ Gause, "Is Saudi Arabia Really Counter-Revolutionary"; Ellen Knickmeyer, "Trouble Down South: For Saudi Arabia, Yemen's Implosion Is a Nightmare," *POMEPS Briefings* 5, (2011), 22-25; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Yemen's Contested Transition," in *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*, ed. Kristian Ulrichsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 149-164.

⁹⁵ Mohammed El-Katiri, "Saudi Arabia and the Maghreb," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 186-207.

nor in its aftermath.⁹⁶ In Egypt, Saudi Arabia was deeply worried about the fall of President Mubarak and the MB's subsequent rise to power — and it was dismayed by what it perceived as Washington's readiness to abandon its long-time ally in Cairo and work with Islamists.⁹⁷ Together with the UAE, Saudi Arabia is regarded as a primary foreign supporter of the uprising against President Morsi in 2013, the Egyptian military's decision to depose him, and the takeover of power by General-turned-President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.⁹⁸ Several analysts also that Saudi Arabia adopted an increasingly uncompromising stance towards the MB across the region after the events in Egypt in 2013, declaring it a terrorist organisation in 2014.⁹⁹

In Syria, Saudi Arabia was a leading proponent of regime change after an initial attempt to convince President Al-Assad to accept reforms had failed. Phillips, in particular, chronicles Saudi Arabia's backing for the political and armed opposition, not least in response to Iran's expanding influence in the country.¹⁰⁰ He also details Saudi Arabia's outrage over the US government's unwillingness to intervene decisively against the regime in Damascus even after chemical weapons were used in August 2013, all while Washington was negotiating with Tehran over the Iranian nuclear programme. Yet, Phillips and several others also note that Saudi Arabia's support for the Syrian opposition was not absolute; for example, it promoted only specific factions over others favoured by Qatar and Turkey.¹⁰¹

There is agreement in the literature that Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Uprisings was mostly reactive and piecemeal, rather than part of a proactive

⁹⁶ El-Katiri, "Saudi Arabia and the Maghreb"; Toby Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah: Gulf States' Foreign Policy Towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings," in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44-60; Rene Rieger, "In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," in *Saudi Arabia and the Arab Uprising: National, Regional and Global Responses* (Cambridge: Gulf Research Centre Cambridge, 2013).

⁹⁷ Gregory F. Gause, "Why the Iran Deal Scares Saudi Arabia," *The New Yorker*, 26 November 2013, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-the-iran-deal-scares-saudi-arabia>.

[accessed 13 December 2019]; Neil Quilliam, "The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom's Position in the Gulf Crisis," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 109-26; Rieger, "In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

⁹⁸ Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Egypt: An Uneasy Relationship," *The Caravan*, no. 1713 (2016); Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers*; Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia's Relations with Egypt," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 55-74.

⁹⁹ For example: David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudis Put Terrorist Label on Muslim Brotherhood," *The New York Times*, 7 March 2014, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/middleeast/saudis-put-terrorist-label-on-muslim-brotherhood.html?_r=0. [accessed 15 December 2019]; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux."

¹⁰⁰ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

¹⁰¹ Asad Abu Khalil, "How the Saudi-Qatari Rivalry Has Fueled the War in Syria," *The Intercept*, 29 June 2018, available at: <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/29/syria-war-saudi-arabia-qatar/>. [accessed 8 August 2019]; Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*; Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux."

strategy. Nevertheless, several observers¹⁰² identify overarching concerns driving Saudi Arabia's behaviour during this time: It perceived US policy in the MENA as too cautious and generally misguided, creating a strategic vacuum in which chaos could spread, and encouraging what Riyadh perceived to be Tehran's destabilising regional behaviour by being overly focused reaching the JCPOA. Some note that this also led Saudi Arabia to pursue more concerted hedging efforts by expanding its relationships with Russia and China.¹⁰³ Further, besides perceiving Iran as benefiting from, and fomenting instability in the region, Saudi Arabia was concerned about the fracturing of the Arab world and sought to prevent the collapse of states such as Yemen. More generally, as comes through in the New Middle East Cold War literature, Saudi Arabia turned against the forces that it perceived as undermining the basic cohesion of the Arab state system.¹⁰⁴ This included terrorist organisations like Daesh, but also the MB (especially in Egypt), which Riyadh regarded as too open to engagement with Iran and whose historic transnational agenda it saw as a threat to its own interests. It also included Qatar, which Saudi Arabia viewed as promoting the MB and undermining the stability of various Arab and GCC states (for example through Al-Jazeera's critical coverage of the government in Bahrain). In 2014, together with the UAE, Saudi Arabia therefore sought to pressure Qatar into changing its foreign policy by withdrawing its ambassador from Doha for nine months.¹⁰⁵

5. 2. 3. The 2015 Succession and its Impact on Foreign Policy

There is agreement in the literature that while Saudi Arabia's regional foreign policy during the first half of the 2010s took a more activist turn than in previous decades, it still followed familiar lines.¹⁰⁶ Gause summarises the kingdom's traditional approach to foreign policy as "money and guns to local clients, media and propaganda support for its side, diplomatic pressure regionally and internationally to achieve its aims."¹⁰⁷ Although there are no arguments that

¹⁰² Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring"; Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East"; Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia"; Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux."

¹⁰³ Fulton and Sim, *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*; Samaan, *Strategic Hedging*;

¹⁰⁴ Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism"; Khoury, "The Arab Cold War Revisited"; Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War"; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Valbjorn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War."

¹⁰⁵ Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia and the GCC States," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 75-91; Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

¹⁰⁶ Echagüe, "Saudi Arabia: Emboldened yet Vulnerable"; Rieger, "In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring"; Steinberg, "Anführer der Gegenrevolution."

¹⁰⁷ Gause "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges," 42.

Saudi Arabia abandoned this approach in the second half of the century, there is a notion that the succession of King Salman and the ascent of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has led to a step-change. This is generally described as a combination of increased boldness and assertiveness in regional affairs, and a readiness to wield hard power unilaterally (or in concert with selected Arab partners, especially the UAE).¹⁰⁸

Even though scholarly analysis of this post-2015 era of the kingdom's history is still in its infancy, there is emerging consensus that decision-making structures have changed significantly, affecting both domestic and foreign policy. Scholars tend to explain foreign policy-making under King Abdullah (and his predecessors) as an often slow-moving process of consensus-building amongst a number of powerful individuals who had their own power bases within the system.

This included Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal, who controlled his ministry from 1975 until his death in 2015; Prince Nayef (died in 2012) and his son Mohammed bin Nayef in the Ministry of Interior; Prince Sultan (died in 2011) and Prince Salman (King since 2015) as Ministers of Defence; and Khaled Al-Tuwaijri, Chief of King Abdullah's Royal Court.¹⁰⁹ The latter, for example, is often identified as a strong opponent of the MB and a driving force in shaping Saudi Arabia's policy towards the group, particularly after 2013.¹¹⁰ Phillips describes how Saudi Arabia's policy towards the war in Syria was substantially defined by the respective person in charge. He details how Riyadh's engagement with the opposition became increasingly selective after King Abdullah transferred the Syria file from Prince Bandar bin Sultan to Mohammed bin Nayef and his own son and Head of the Saudi National Guard,

¹⁰⁸ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "King Salman and His Son: Winning the USA, Losing the Rest," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & CO, 2018), 235-50; Gause "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges"; Bernard Haykel, "The Rise of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Reveals a Harsh Truth," *The Washington Post*, 22 January 2018, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/01/22/the-rise-of-saudi-arabias-crown-prince-reveals-a-harsh-truth/?utm_term=.8a51fa7676c2. [accessed 17 August 2019]; Bernard Haykel, "A Middle Eastern-Studies Professor on His Conversations with Mohammed Bin Salman," interview by Isaac Chotiner, *The New Yorker*, 8 April 2019, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/a-middle-eastern-studies-professor-interprets-mohammed-bin-salman> [accessed 17 August 2019]; David B. Ottaway, "Watch out Washington, the Saudi Hawks Are in Ascendancy," *Viewpoints* 75 (Washington DC: Wilson Center, 2015); Neil Partrick, "Saudi Foreign Policy: A New Regional Approach or More of the Same?" *Saudi Arabia: Domestic, Regional and International Challenges* (Singapore, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East"; Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia"; Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*.

¹¹⁰ Ali Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 197-215; Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World*.

Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah. Mohammed bin Nayef, who was also responsible for the kingdom's internal counter-terrorism policy, was much more concerned with the growing strength of jihadi organisations like Jabhat Al-Nusra and Daesh.¹¹¹

Under King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, meanwhile, decision-making is seen as having become much more centralised. Gause argues that the distribution of power within the royal family has effectively been limited to the King and Crown Prince themselves; other princes and ministers are no longer near-equals with significant autonomy, but rather implementers of decisions flowing from the centre.¹¹² Most of the key individuals named above have either died or were sidelined (the demotion of then-Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in June 2017 being the most prominent example). Their replacements have mostly been technocrats or princes without their own power base within the royal family. In the Foreign Ministry, for example, this has included Adel Al-Jubeir (Foreign Minister from 2015-2018; Minister of State for Foreign Affairs since 2018), Ibrahim Abdulaziz Al-Assaf (Foreign Minister from 2018-2019) and Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud (Foreign Minister since October 2019). Mohamed bin Salman himself has assumed the post of Minister of Defence; his brother Khaled bin Salman became his deputy in February 2019. Gause and others also note that this centralisation of power has not been limited to the dynamics within the royal family and bureaucratic structures, but has also included stripping the clerical establishment of much of its influence.¹¹³ While they also warn that these changes could lead to internal dissent in the future, they agree that it is already clear that Saudi Arabia's post-2015 foreign policy should be regarded as more personalised and, specifically, a reflection of the views and decisions of Mohammed bin Salman. In this context, various profiles of the Crown Prince conclude that this has had implications primarily for the style, rather than the general direction, of Saudi Arabia's regional behaviour. They see a further hardening of Saudi Arabia's attitudes towards Iran and the

¹¹¹ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

¹¹² Gause "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges."

¹¹³ Al-Rasheed, "King Salman and His Son"; Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Mystique of Monarchy: The Magic of Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & CO, 2018), 45-71; Gause "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges"; Karen Smith-Diwan, "The Big Gamble of Mohammed Bin Salman – and Saudi Arabia," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 23 March 2020, available at: <https://agsiw.org/the-big-gamble-of-mohammed-bin-salman-and-saudi-arabia/>. [accessed 15 May 2020].

MB, paired with an increased readiness to take action quickly and a more openly conveyed claim to regional leadership.¹¹⁴

5. 2. 4. 2015-2020: Mohammed bin Salman's Foreign Policy

Hubbard's and Hope and Scheck's books about Mohammed bin Salman¹¹⁵ provide useful condensed overviews of Saudi Arabia's post-2015 foreign policy behaviour. They portray the period from the launch of the intervention in Yemen in March 2015 to the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey in October 2018, in particular, as punctuated by one bold foreign policy initiative after another — often with questionable outcomes.

Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen against the Houthi movement (officially known as Ansar Allah) and aimed at restoring the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi has attracted much attention. Partrick highlights the long history of Saudi influence in Yemen — to which Gause's 1990 book *Saudi-Yemeni Relations* is a testament — and notes Saudi Arabia had fought a brief war against the Houthis in 2009.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, observers agree that the 2015 intervention signalled an unprecedented Saudi willingness to deploy its military beyond its borders and stand up an ad-hoc Arab coalition without relying on US leadership (though being enabled by US military assistance).¹¹⁷ Concurrently, there is also agreement that the intervention has not been a success. Over the years, several authors have noted that Saudi Arabia has failed to defeat the Houthis and that the group's relationship with Iran — one of the main reasons for intervention in the first place — has strengthened since 2015.¹¹⁸ Many have detailed the tactical missteps of Saudi Arabia's war effort, often contrasting them with the performance of the Emirati military, Saudi Arabia's closest partner in

¹¹⁴ Karen Elliott-House, "Profile of a Prince: Promise and Peril in Mohammed Bin Salman's Vision 2030," *Belfer Center Paper* (April 2019); Hubbard, *MBS*.

¹¹⁵ Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil*; Hubbard, *MBS*.

¹¹⁶ Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia and Yemen," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 242-60. See also: Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

¹¹⁷ Abubakr Al-Shamahi, "Articulating the New Gulf Countries' Interventionism: What Lessons Can Be Learned from He Case of Saudi Arabia and Yemen?" in *The Gulf Monarchies Beyond the Arab Spring*, eds. Luigi Narbone and Martin Lestra (Florence: European University Institute, 2015), 46-52; Frank Gardner, "Saudi Arabia Flexing Its Muscles in the Middle East," *BBC*, 8 August 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-33825064>. [accessed 18 August 2019]; David B. Roberts, "A New Era for Gulf Militaries," *Gulf Affairs* (Spring 2016), 6-8; Shihabi, "Saudi Arabia's New Foreign Policy Doctrine."

¹¹⁸ Haykel, "A Middle Eastern-Studies Professor"; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Marc Valeri, "The Gulf Monarchies and Iran: Between Confrontation and Geostrategic Realities," in *The Gulf Monarchies Beyond the Arab Spring*, eds. Luigi Narbone and Martin Lestra (Florence: European University Institute, 2015), 38-45.

intervention.¹¹⁹ Towards the end of the decade, many analysts wondered how Saudi Arabia could extract itself from the conflict without having to admit defeat.¹²⁰ Some also argue that as Saudi Arabia has become more embroiled in Yemen, it has gradually reduced its involvement in other areas, including the war in Syria and the US-led military campaign against Daesh.¹²¹

Amongst the other major Saudi foreign policy initiatives under Mohammed bin Salman, summarised by Hubbard, Hope and Scheck, and analysed in more detail by others, are the isolation of Qatar in the Gulf Crisis, a rapprochement with Israel, the attempt to force the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and a general ramping up of tensions with Iran. Ulrichsen¹²² and Krieg's¹²³ volumes describe Saudi Arabia's leading role in the Gulf Crisis as a renewed attempt (following the 2014 diplomatic crisis) to force Doha into alignment with Riyadh's anti-MB and anti-Iran regional policies. In line with Saudi commentator Al-Yahya,¹²⁴ they also note that Saudi Arabia had concerns about Qatar's foreign policy reaching back to the 1990s. Black describes Saudi Arabia's more open attitude towards Israel, but also emphasises that relations remain limited and mostly under the surface.¹²⁵ (The kingdom did not join the Abraham Accords in 2020.) The Hariri incident in November 2017 is generally discussed in the context of Saudi Arabia's attempts to counter Iranian influence in the MENA. These have intensified after 2015 and included, for example, cutting diplomatic relations with Tehran in 2016, ramping up anti-Iranian

¹¹⁹ Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 2): The Air Campaign," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 August 2015, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-saudi-uae-war-effort-in-yemen-part-2-the-air-campaign>. [accessed 8 August 2019]; Roberts, "A New Era for Gulf Militaries"; Roberts, "Bucking the Trend."

¹²⁰ Maria-Louise Clausen, "Saudi Arabian Military Activism in Yemen: Interactions between the Domestic and the Systemic Level," *POMEPS Studies: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East* 34 (2019), 76-80; Colum Lynch, Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, "Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?" *Foreign Policy*, 20 November 2019, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>. [accessed 20 February 2020]; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Endgames for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen," *POMEPS Studies* 29 (2018), 31-33.

¹²¹ Hubbard, *MBS*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux."

¹²² Ulrichsen, *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*; Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

¹²³ Krieg, *Divided Gulf*.

¹²⁴ Mohammed Al-Yahya, "The Rift with Qatar as Seen in Riyadh," *Atlantic Council*, 13 June 2017, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-rift-with-qatar-as-seen-in-riyadh/>. [accessed 8 August 2019].

¹²⁵ Ian Black, "Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation" *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (London: Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019).

rhetoric, and full endorsement of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against Tehran.¹²⁶

There is a sense in the literature that Saudi foreign policy has become more subdued towards the end of the decade and in the aftermath of the Khashoggi murder, which is regarded as having severely damaged Saudi Arabia's image, particularly amongst its western partners.¹²⁷ Megerisi suggests that Saudi Arabia may have played a role in encouraging the UAE-backed campaign by Haftar to seize the Libyan capital Tripoli, launched in April 2019, but does not see significant Saudi involvement in the conflict.¹²⁸ Several observers also note that Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran rhetoric has diminished somewhat in the wake of the attacks on Saudi oil installations in September 2019.¹²⁹ Yet, as outlined above, Saudi foreign policy was seen as primarily occupied with finding a way out of the war in Yemen.

5. 3. The UAE: Regional Merchant Warrior

The literature describes the UAE's foreign policy during the 2010s as initially cautious in the early months of the Arab Uprisings, and then increasingly assertive as the decade progressed. As noted above, scholarly examination of the UAE as a regional power is ongoing; important insights — about the UAE's military inventions in Yemen and Libya, for example — will likely emerge in the coming years. Initial arguments and conclusions depict the UAE as a rising Arab power, led primarily by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, that is willing to deploy coercive hard power, including military force, to advance its regional agenda. In particular, it is seen as defining itself as a strong opponent of revolutionary change, in general, and political Islam (Sunni and Shia), in particular.

¹²⁶ Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia*; Ghattas, *Black Wave*; Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World*; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Fear and Loathing in Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2016, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/07/fear-and-loathing-in-saudi-arabia/>. [accessed 8 August 2019]; Ali Shihabi, "The Iranian Threat: The Saudi Perspective," *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 7 May 2018, available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/15/the-iranian-threat-the-saudi-perspective/>. [accessed 8 August 2019].

¹²⁷ Al-Rasheed, "King Salman and His Son"; Elliott-House, "Profile of a Prince"; Haykel, "A Middle Eastern-Studies Professor."

¹²⁸ Tarek Megerisi, "Libya's Global Civil War," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

¹²⁹ Benoit Faucon, Summer Said and Warren Strobel, "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Ease Tensions with Iran.," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2019, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-to-ease-tensions-with-iran-11576178194> [accessed 8 February 2020]; Patrick Wintour, "Nervous Saudis Try to Ease Middle East Tensions," *The Guardian*, 9 January 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/09/saudi-arabia-urges-de-escalation-of-middle-east-crisis>. [accessed 8 February 2020].

5. 3. 1. Foundations of the UAE's Foreign Policy

As noted above, the UAE's rise to the status as one of the most influential Arab states in the MENA is a recent phenomenon. Authors such as Abdulla,¹³⁰ Al-Mezaini,¹³¹ Ibish¹³² and Ulrichen,¹³³ distinguish between UAE's foreign policy during the lifetime of the federation's founder and long-time President Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nayhan, and the time after his death in 2004 and the transfer of power to a new generation of leaders. They describe the former as generally cautious and focused on quiet diplomacy and the distribution of financial assistance to Arab and Islamic causes; and the latter as more confident and characterised by a more global orientation, increased emphasis on national interests and power projection. However, they also agree that the UAE's post-2011 foreign policy has its foundations in both periods.

Davidson,¹³⁴ Miller¹³⁵ and Ulrichsen's¹³⁶ books chronicle the UAE's development since its creation in 1971 and highlight its unique character as a federation of seven emirates, each with its own ruling families and governance structure. But they also emphasise that as the two largest and richest emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and their ruling families, the Al-Nahyan and Al-Makhtoum, respectively, have long dominated the UAE's internal politics and foreign policy. The UAE's rise to global prominence is described primarily as the result of its rapidly growing economy during the 1990s and 2000s, fuelled mostly by Abu Dhabi's oil exports and Dubai's (and later also Abu Dhabi's) emergence as the MENA's leading, internationally-connected commercial hub. Sovereign wealth funds with high-profile international investment portfolios, and the emergence of several world-leading companies (such as the Etihad and Emirates airlines the DP World logistics company) made the UAE a globally relevant and influential economic player. The 2008 financial crisis hit Dubai hard, but the UAE as a whole was able to compensate losses with Abu Dhabi's

¹³⁰ Gaith A. Abdulla, "The Making of UAE Foreign Policy: A 'Dynamic Process Model'," *The Emirates Occasional Papers* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014).

¹³¹ Khalid Al-Mezaini, "The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy since 2011," in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 192-204.

¹³² Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*.

¹³³ Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹³⁴ Davidson, *Dubai*; Davidson, *Abu Dhabi*; Davidson, *After the Sheikhs*; Davidson, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism*.

¹³⁵ Miller, *Desert Kingdoms*.

¹³⁶ Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

oil wealth; in fact, the UAE gained international clout, particularly in Europe and the USA, by providing capital for major bailout efforts.¹³⁷

Beginning in the wake of the 1990/91 Gulf War, the UAE invested significant effort and resources into expanding its bilateral defence relationships, especially with the USA, France and the UK, and building a capable military of its own. Ibish¹³⁸ and Roberts¹³⁹ explain that the UAE saw Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as a cautionary example of what could happen to a rich but militarily weak country surrounded by stronger neighbours. In this context, it is important to note that many analysts argue that the UAE has long perceived Iran and Saudi Arabia as the primary state-based threats to its national security. The former has occupied three Emirati islands in the Gulf since 1971; and with the latter, the UAE has had long standing-border disputes, while Emirati leaders are described as being concerned about both Saudi hegemony on the Arabian Peninsula, and instability in Saudi Arabia, which would be difficult to contain.¹⁴⁰ Roberts finds that the UAE's approach to improving its defence capabilities differed significantly from that of its neighbours in the Gulf. Like other Gulf states, it purchased advanced defence equipment, invited western militaries to establish bases on its territory, and brought in foreign trainers and advisors. However, in contrast to its neighbours, the UAE also focused explicitly on developing its armed forces' military effectiveness and expeditionary capabilities. For example, Emirati troops deployed alongside US and NATO forces in Somalia, the Balkans and Afghanistan.¹⁴¹ In the process, Roberts and others note, the UAE gained a reputation for having the arguably most capable military of all Arab states.¹⁴²

5. 3. 2. Mohammed bin Zayed's Foreign Policy

Mohammed bin Zayed is widely regarded as the defining figure behind the UAE's contemporary foreign policy. Although his official titles of Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE's military have not

¹³⁷ Emma Soubrier, "Global and Regional Curses, Empowered Gulf Rivals, and the Evolving Paradigm of Regional Security," *POMEPS Studies: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East* 34 (2019), 63-66; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹³⁸ Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*.

¹³⁹ Roberts, "Bucking the Trend."

¹⁴⁰ Miller, *Desert Kingdoms*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*; Robert Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future," *The New York Times Magazine*, 9 January 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/magazine/united-arab-emirates-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>. [accessed 12 February 2020].

¹⁴¹ Roberts, "Bucking the Trend."

¹⁴² Yoel Guzansky, "Sparta in the Gulf: The Growing Regional Clout of the United Arab Emirates," *INSS Insight* 883 (8 January 2017); Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Roberts, "Bucking the Trend."

changed since 2004 and 2005, respectively, together with the Dubai's Emir Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Makhtoum, he is considered to have been the country's most important decision-maker for much of the 21st century.

Several authors have traced Mohammed bin Zayed's rise to power. A trained military officer, he became Chief of Staff of the UAE's armed forces in 1993 and oversaw the above described development of the country's defence capabilities. Many argue that Mohammed bin Zayed's military background may have shaped his thinking about foreign policy, suggesting a tendency to favour hard-security and military responses.¹⁴³ In 2004, Mohammed bin Zayed's half-brother Khalifa bin Zayed succeeded their father as Emir of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE. However, as Ulrichsen details, for example, even before Khalifa bin Zayed suffered a reportedly incapacitating stroke in 2014, Mohammed bin Zayed held power behind the scenes, particularly with regards to security and defence. Several of his full brothers assumed key positions with the UAE's federal structure through the 2000s, further strengthening his position. This includes Abdullah bin Zayed as Foreign Minister, Hazza bin Zayed as National Security Advisor, succeeded by Tahnoun bin Zayed in 2016, and Mansour bin Zayed as Minister for Presidential Affairs.¹⁴⁴

Mohammed bin Zayed is said to have a close personal and working relationship with Dubai's Emir Mohammed bin Rashid.¹⁴⁵ But although the latter, who also holds the offices of Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the UAE, technically outranks him, Mohammed bin Zayed is widely seen as effectively controlling the federation's national security, defence and foreign policy (with the partial exception of the Dubai and the other Emirates' international trade and investment policies).¹⁴⁶ Dubai's status as an international commercial hub — notwithstanding its financial difficulties — and reputation as the Arab worlds' most socially-liberal city is seen as a key factor in the UAE's foreign policy, particularly in terms of soft power. But the above described structural factors

¹⁴³ See for example: Andreas Krieg, "Die MBZ-Doktrin," *Zenith*, 10 July 2018, available at: <https://magazin.zenith.me/de/politik/die-vae-und-autoritäre-regime-der-arabischen-welt> [accessed 12 February 2020]; Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE"; Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision."

¹⁴⁴ Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁴⁵ Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Matthias Sailer, "Hardly a Ruler in Waiting," *Qantara*, 28 March 2018, available at: <https://en.qantara.de/content/uae-foreign-policy-and-the-crown-prince-of-abu-dhabi-hardly-a-ruler-in-waiting?nopaging=1>. [accessed 12 February 2020].

¹⁴⁶ Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Sailer, "Hardly a Ruler in Waiting"; Krieg, "Die MBZ-Doktrin"; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

and Mohammed bin Zayed's position of power mean that the UAE's foreign policy during the 2010s is seen as primarily directed from Abu Dhabi.¹⁴⁷

The literature also portrays Mohammed bin Zayed as having had a personal role in shaping the decidedly anti-Islamist stance that is regarded as one of the key characteristics of the UAE's post-2011 foreign policy and has spawned a rich debate.¹⁴⁸ Various profiles of the Crown Prince¹⁴⁹ and scholarly analyses of the UAE's enmity towards Islamist groups¹⁵⁰ describe him personally hostile towards various forms of political Islam. More generally, scholars cited throughout this paragraph explain the UAE's anti-Islamist stance as driven by a view held across much of the UAE's senior leadership that political Islam is inherently opposed and threatening to the UAE's political and socio-economic development model.

Freer¹⁵¹ and Ulrichsen¹⁵² provide especially detailed accounts of the UAE's relationship with the MB. They trace how MB members from across the region were allowed to settle in the Emirates, and helped to build their bureaucratic institutions even before the creation of the UAE in 1971. In fact, the local MB affiliate, Al-Islah, established in 1974, received support from Dubai's ruler at the time, and until 2010 was widely considered to be enjoying the personal patronage of Ras Al-Khaimah's Emir Saqr bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi.¹⁵³ Yet, as Islamism emerged as the main political opposition in many Arab countries in the 1980s and 90s (as outlined in Chapter 4), and as the UAE's development agenda increasingly relied on opening the country to global (especially western) influences, attitudes changed. Al-Islah members and sympathisers were regarded as potential subversives with potential loyalties to MB affiliates

¹⁴⁷ Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment*; Al-Mezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁴⁸ See for example: Abdulla, "Gulf Perspectives on the Muslim Brotherhood"; Al-Mezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy*; Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam"; Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections"; David B. Roberts, "Mosque and State: The United Arab Emirates' Secular Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 March 2016, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-arab-emirates/2016-03-18/mosque-and-state>. [accessed 12 February 2020]; Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE"; Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles."

¹⁴⁹ David D. Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't MBS. It's MBZ," *The New York Times*, 2 June 2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/world/middleeast/crown-prince-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>. [accessed 12 February 2020]; Krieg, "Die MBZ-Doktrin"; Sailer, "Hardly a Ruler in Waiting"; Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision."

¹⁵⁰ Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam"; Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections"; Hedges and Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood"; Roberts, "Mosque and State"; Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE."

¹⁵¹ See sections on the UAE in: Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections."

¹⁵² Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles."

¹⁵³ He died in October 2010.

elsewhere in the region, and were removed from positions of influence across the state. Abu Dhabi and Dubai's resolve to distance the UAE from any association with political Islam was further solidified in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks (two perpetrators were Emirati nationals), and the 2006 DP World controversy (the US Senate blocked the company's acquisition of several American ports on national security grounds). In general, the literature describes the gradual development of an Emirati narrative that made no substantive distinction between the views espoused by the MB and its affiliates, jihadist groups like AQ and Daesh, and Iran and its regional partners. Moreover, it understood Islamism (Sunni and Shia) as inherently transnational and expansionist, and therefore a threat to the foundation of the UAE as a sovereign state.

5. 3. 3. The UAE's Response to the Arab Uprisings (2011-2013)

The literature describes the UAE's initial response to the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11 as driven by the concern that revolutionary change across the region could create openings for forces seen as hostile to the UAE, particularly Islamist groups and Iran. There was no popular unrest in the UAE in 2011, but the government cracked down against a group of activists behind a petition calling for political reform, including, most notably, several members and sympathisers of Al-Islah.¹⁵⁴ Abroad, the UAE's response to the Uprisings was initially coordinated within the GCC. Together with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, the UAE provided financial assistance to the economically weaker members Bahrain and Oman, as well as to the MENA's other monarchies in Jordan and Morocco.¹⁵⁵ The UAE also took part in GCC's military intervention in Bahrain, where it saw Iran as a main beneficiary and driver of protests.¹⁵⁶ In Yemen, the UAE also supported the GCC initiative to facilitate a transition of power.¹⁵⁷

Further afield, the UAE adopted varying positions with regards to the Arab countries most affected by the Uprisings. It did not welcome the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak, but mostly observed the initial stages of the two countries' subsequent political transitions from a

¹⁵⁴ See sections on the UAE in: Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections"; Hedges and Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood"; and Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Mezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁵⁶ Matthiesen's account of the intervention focuses on Saudi Arabia, but also covers the UAE's involvement. See: Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Mezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

distance, while providing some economic assistance. Worth argues that Mohammed bin Zayed was dismayed by the US government's call for Mubarak's resignation, seeing it both as a strategic mistake and a warning about the reliability of Washington's commitment to the security of its partners in the region.¹⁵⁸ In Syria, the UAE supported the emerging GCC and Arab League consensus condemning the regime's violence and calling for President Al-Assad to go, but did not join its neighbours Saudi Arabia and Qatar in actively supporting the armed opposition.¹⁵⁹

Finally, the UAE embraced the regime change agenda in Libya. Alongside Qatar — though, as many argue, from the start in barely concealed competition¹⁶⁰ — the UAE was the main regional power involved in the NATO-led intervention helping to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. Several authors detail how the UAE helped shape regional support for the intervention, participated in military operations, and sought to corral the Libyan opposition leadership and liaise between it and the international community.¹⁶¹ Gaub suggests that the UAE saw the intervention as another opportunity to present itself as a capable military partner to the participating NATO members.¹⁶² But all the analysts cited above also note that even in the early stages of the intervention it was clear that the UAE was promoting specific political and armed actors that it saw as pushing back against more Islamist factions within the opposition (many of whom had ties to Qatar). Cole and McQuinn's¹⁶³ edited volume about the Libyan revolution and El-Gomati's analysis,¹⁶⁴ for example, describe how this early manifestation of different preferences between the UAE and Qatar shaped the war in Libya in 2011 and its aftermath.

¹⁵⁸ Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision."

¹⁵⁹ Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

¹⁶⁰ Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, eds., *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (London, Hurst & Co., 2015); Anas El-Gomati, "The Libyan Revolution Undone - the Conversation Will Not Be Televised," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 179-96.

¹⁶¹ Florence Gaub, *Against All Odds: Relations between Nato and the MENA Region* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2012); Gaub, "From Doha with Love"; Jean-Marc Rickli, "The Political Rationale and Implications of the United Arab Emirates' Military Involvement in Libya," in *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*, eds. Dag Henriksen and Ann Karin Larssen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 135-52; Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE"; Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles."

¹⁶² Gaub, *Against All Odds*.

¹⁶³ Cole and McQuinn, *The Libyan Revolution*.

¹⁶⁴ El-Gomati, "The Libyan Revolution Undone."

5. 3. 4. The UAE as Anti-Islamist Counter-Revolutionary (2013-2020)

The literature describes how the UAE's foreign policy has grown increasingly assertive during the 2010s, with many of its positions adopted in wake of the Arab Uprisings becoming more defined. This can most easily be traced by reviewing how the UAE engaged with, and sought to influence developments in, the Levant, North Africa, and the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula (and, by extension, the Horn of Africa), respectively. Throughout, the UAE's assertive posture, which has included the readiness to unilaterally deploy military force (e.g. in Libya), is widely understood as influenced by disillusionment with US policy in the MENA, particularly during the Obama presidency. Several authors describe the UAE as having concluded that it can no longer rely on the US to maintain the regional order.¹⁶⁵ This was based on what Abu Dhabi saw as Washington's lack of support for Mubarak in Egypt, and Obama's decision not to intervene in Syria and limit negotiations with Tehran to Iran's nuclear programme rather than its regional behaviour. The UAE had a more favourable view of the Trump administration, but remained sceptical of its commitment to regional security. Throughout the decade, the UAE therefore continued to strengthen its ties with other global powers,¹⁶⁶ most notably Russia¹⁶⁷ and China.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, all authors cited in this paragraph also stress that the bilateral relationship with the USA is likely to remain of singular importance for the UAE's defence and security policy, albeit with lowered expectations.

The UAE's involvement in the Levant region has remained limited. The UAE does not feature as a major player in Phillips' study of the international dimensions of the Syrian war.¹⁶⁹ It maintained its opposition to the regime in Damascus for most of the decade, but focused primarily on aiding Jordan in dealing with the influx of refugees, rather than providing significant support to the armed opposition. The UAE joined the US-led international coalition against Daesh in 2014, but from 2015 onwards the focus of its military activities shifted to Yemen.¹⁷⁰ Towards the end of the decade, the UAE began to reestablish

¹⁶⁵ Al-Mezaini, "The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy"; Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision."

¹⁶⁶ Samaan, *Strategic Hedging*.

¹⁶⁷ Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the UAE: An Ideational Partnership," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020), 125-40.

¹⁶⁸ Fulton, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*.

¹⁶⁹ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

¹⁷⁰ Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

open relations with Damascus, and appeared more concerned about Turkish influence in the country than President Al-Assad's future.¹⁷¹ Black traces how the UAE has gradually expanded its engagement with Israel throughout the 2010s,¹⁷² culminating in the normalisation of bilateral relations under the Abraham Accords in 2020.¹⁷³

Accounts of the UAE's post-2011 foreign policy towards North Africa describe it as focused on working to reverse gains made by the MB and other Islamist groups, particularly in Egypt and Libya.¹⁷⁴ In Egypt, the UAE turned against the government of President Morsi, increasingly seeing it as a threat to its national security and regional interests, which is traced in Al-Qassemi's articles of the time.¹⁷⁵ In 2013, the UAE quickly endorsed the takeover by the Egyptian military led by General-turned-President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, providing both political and economic support;¹⁷⁶ Kirkpatrick suggests that the UAE may have actively encouraged Morsi's ousting.¹⁷⁷ In Libya, several analysts detail the UAE's position as a primary backer Khalifa Haftar, his self-declared Libyan National Army, and associated political actors.¹⁷⁸ From 2014 onwards, it has offered Haftar political support on the international stage; provided his forces with military equipment, violating the UN arms embargo on Libya; and conducted airstrikes on his behalf. Observers note that, just as in Syria, in Libya, the UAE

¹⁷¹ For example: Kersten Knipp and Tom Allinson, "Turkey-United Arab Emirates Rivalry Turns Rancorous," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 May 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-united-arab-emirates-rivalry-turns-rancorous/a-53454973>. [accessed 8 August 2020]; Ramani, "Russia and the UAE"; Michael Young, "As Arab States Normalise with Syria, Will This Push Them to Finance Its Reconstruction?" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 24 January 2019, available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78190>. [accessed 21 February 2020].

¹⁷² Black, "Just Below the Surface."

¹⁷³ See for example: Steven A. Cook, "What's Behind the New Israel-UAE Peace Deal?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 August 2020, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whats-behind-new-israel-uae-peace-deal>. [accessed 24 August 2020]; Tova Norlen and Tamir Sinai, "The Abraham Accords – Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik?" *Security Insights* 064 (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2020).

¹⁷⁴ Al-Mezaini, "The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy"; Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam"; Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah"; Ulrichsen, Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁷⁵ Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "Egypt's Brotherhood War on the UAE," *Gulf News*, 17 June 2013, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/egypts-brotherhood-war-on-the-uae-1.1198481>. [accessed 8 August 2019]; Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "Gulf States Embrace Post-Brotherhood Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2013, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/gulf-states-egypt-muslim-brotherhood.html>. [accessed 8 August 2019]

¹⁷⁶ Theodor Karasik, "UAE People & Politics: UAE and Egypt - Supportive and on the Same Page," *The National*, 6 August 2015, available at: <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/uae-people--politics-uae-and-egypt--supportive-and-on-the-same-page>. [accessed 12 August 2019]; Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers*.

¹⁷⁷ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Recordings Suggest Emirates and Egyptian Military Pushed Ousting of Morsi," *The New York Times*, 1 March 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/middleeast/recordings-suggest-emirates-and-egyptian-military-pushed-ousting-of-morsi.html>. [accessed 5 May 2019].

¹⁷⁸ Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam"; El-Gomati, "The Libyan Revolution Undone"; Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020); Megerisi, "Libya's Global Civil War"; Wehrey, *The Burning Shores*.

has also become increasingly embroiled in a regional rivalry with Turkey towards the end of the decade.¹⁷⁹

Finally, the UAE is seen as having become increasingly influential and assertive in setting the agenda within the Gulf region. Kamrava, Krieg and Ulrichsen's books describe the UAE as a driving force in the intra-Gulf conflicts with Qatar that culminated in the 2017 Gulf Crisis, with Abu Dhabi perceiving Doha as undermining regional stability.¹⁸⁰ Meanwhile, the UAE established an increasingly close alignment with Saudi Arabia, particularly following the ascent of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Several scholars argue that this represents a shift in Emirati policy towards its larger neighbour; where had previously maintained a degree of distance from Saudi Arabia, as noted above, it now fully endorsed the kingdom's new leadership and domestic reform agenda, and at least outwardly sought present a united front with Riyadh on many regional matters.¹⁸¹ Much has been written about a reportedly close personal relationship between Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman, with some suggesting that the former acted as a mentor, and certainly a vocal international proponent for the latter.¹⁸² Besides the dispute with Qatar, the Emirati-Saudi alignment has been most apparent in the intervention in Yemen. The UAE's objectives in Yemen are generally described as twofold: to prevent the Iranian-backed Houthi militia from controlling the country, including the adjacent Bab Al-Mandeb Strait; and to counter local Sunni Islamist groups, including AQ and the MB's local affiliates.¹⁸³ In mid-2019 the UAE significantly reduced its presence in the war, but remained adamant about the commitment to these objectives.¹⁸⁴ For its war effort in Yemen, the UAE relied on its

¹⁷⁹ Knipp and Allinson, "Turkey-United Arab Emirates Rivalry"; Megerisi, "Libya's Global Civil War."

¹⁸⁰ Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*; Krieg, *Divided Gulf*; Ulrichsen, *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*;

Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

¹⁸¹ Al-Mezaini, "The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy"; Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁸² Kirckpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler"; Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision."

¹⁸³ Nicholas Heras, "'Security Belt': The UAE's Tribal Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen," *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 12 (2018); Michael Knights, "The UAE Approach to Counterinsurgency in Yemen," *War on the Rocks*, 23 May 2016, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-u-a-e-approach-to-counterinsurgency-in-yemen/>. [accessed 6 April 2019]; Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 10 August 2015, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-saudi-uae-war-effort-in-yemen-part-1-operation-golden-arrow-in-aden>. [accessed 6 April 2019]; Kyle Monsees, "The UAE's Counterinsurgency Conundrum in Southern Yemen," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 18 August 2016, available at: <https://agsiw.org/the-uaes-counterinsurgency-conundrum-in-southern-yemen/>. [accessed 6 April 2019]; Ulrichsen, "Endgames."

¹⁸⁴ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, "The UAE Drawdown in Yemen is a Welcome Step, but it Needs to Be Reciprocated," *Middle East Institute*, 11 July 2019, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-drawdown-yemen-welcome-step-it-needs-be-reciprocated>. [accessed 12 February 2020].

expanding presence in the Horn of Africa, particularly its military bases in Eritrea and Somaliland. The International Crisis Group analyses the UAE's involvement in the Horn of Africa region as driven by a combination of factors: regional competition for influence with Turkey and Qatar; the UAE's region-wide campaign against Islamist groups; and an effort to establish a power projection capability in the Arabian and Red Seas.¹⁸⁵ Lons also sees an Emirati strategy to establish influence over ports and sea lanes surrounding the Arabian Peninsula and through the Red Sea into the Mediterranean.¹⁸⁶

5. 4. Qatar: Hyperactive Outsider

The literature describes how Qatar's ambition and ability to influence developments in the region waxed and waned over the course of the 2010s. In hindsight, and based on analysis produced to date, the decade can be divided into three main periods: the two and a half years from the beginning of the Arab Uprisings to the abdication of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani mid-2013, during which Qatar's regional activism reached its peak; the four years from Emir Tamim bin Hamad's inauguration to the beginning of the Gulf Crisis in June 2017, during which Qatar's influence in the region gradually diminished; and the years since 2017, in which Qatar has focused on responding to political and economic pressure from its neighbours, including through its regional policies. Throughout all three periods, the literature depicts Qatar as a hyperactive outsider, insistent on charting its own course apart from — and often in opposition to — its neighbours in the Gulf.

5. 4. 1. Foundations of Qatar's Foreign Policy

Qatar's reputation as a "hyperactive"¹⁸⁷ foreign policy actor with ambitions far greater than its geographical size might suggest, had already been established when the Arab Uprisings began. Kamrava,¹⁸⁸ Roberts¹⁸⁹ and Ulrichsen¹⁹⁰ trace many aspects characterising Qatar's foreign policy and regional positioning in

¹⁸⁵ International Crisis Group, "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," *Middle East Report* 206 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019).

¹⁸⁶ Camille Lons, "Battle of the Ports: Emirates Sea Power Spreads from Persian Gulf to Africa," *Newsweek*, 3 August 2018, available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/battle-ports-emirates-sea-power-spreads-persian-gulf-africa-1051959?amp=1>. [accessed 12 February 2020].

¹⁸⁷ Ana Echagüe, "Qatar: The Opportunist," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid: FRIDE, 2015), 67.

¹⁸⁸ Kamrava, *Qatar*.

¹⁸⁹ Roberts, *Qatar*.

¹⁹⁰ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

the 21st century to Hamad bin Khalifa's rise to power in the 1980s and 90s (he became Emir in 1995). While Qatar had previously been closely aligned itself with Saudi Arabia's position on most regional issues, Hamad bin Khalifa took the country in a different direction. Together with his long-time Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani (also Prime Minister from 2007-2013), he transformed Qatar into a super-rich small state with the ambition to play a prominent international role, often purposefully differentiating itself from its neighbours. Hamad bin Khalifa and Hamad bin Jassim, as well as some of the key individuals surrounding them (including the Emir's second wife Moza bin Nasser and long-time energy minister Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Attiyah) are often described as larger-than-life characters possessing a certain revolutionary streak that meant that they were personally sympathetic to the Arab Uprisings' demands for radical change.¹⁹¹ Tamim bin Hamad (Emir since 2013), meanwhile, is generally regarded as more cautious than his father and more focused on internal affairs. Yet, as Crown Prince, he had been involved in Qatar's foreign policy long before 2013, particularly on defence-related matters. The same is true for some of his most prominent ministers, including Khalid Al-Attiyah (Foreign Minister from 2013-2016 and Minister of State for Defence since 2016) and Mohammed bin Abdulrahman (Foreign Minister since 2016). The consensus in the literature is therefore that while Tamim bin Hamad's succession brought a reduction in Qatar's activism, it did not significantly change the country's foreign policy outlook or direction.¹⁹²

Besides the personalities of Qatar's senior leaders, the literature explains the development of Qatar's foreign policy and its rise to international prominence until 2011 as conditioned by two inter-related factors: Qatar's status as a world-leading liquefied natural gas (LNG) producer, and a context in which the Qatari government's near-absolute domestic security stands in sharp contrast to the sense that the country finds itself in a highly insecure regional environment. Qatar's wealth, generated from LNG exports, has enabled its rapid economic development during the 1990s and 2000s and the construction of a generous

¹⁹¹ See for example: Roberts, *Qatar*, and in particular: Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE."

¹⁹² For assessments of the effects of succession see for example: Fatiha Dazi-Héni, "Qatar's Regional Ambitions and the New Emir," *Middle East Institute*, 9 May 2014, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/qatars-regional-ambitions-and-new-emir>. [accessed 3 March 2019]; Andrew Hammond, "Qatar's Leadership Transition: Like Father, Like Son," *ECFR Policy Brief* 95 (2014); Kamrava, *Qatar*, Foreword; Roberts, *Qatar*, Chapter 10; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Foreign Policy Implications of the New Emir's Succession in Qatar," *NOREF Policy Brief* (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2013).

welfare state that had made Qataris the world's richest per-capita population. Paired with the absence of a domestic opposition — and no public protests in 2011¹⁹³ — this has meant that Qatar's foreign policy was devised from a position of almost complete domestic security.¹⁹⁴ Even Davidson, whose book projects the eventual collapse of the Gulf monarchies, concedes that Qatar's extraordinary wealth and small population may allow it to maintain its current social contract longer than its neighbours.¹⁹⁵ The main threat to Qatar's national (and regime) security, meanwhile, is understood to be coming from external factors. Analysts describe Qatar's leadership as primarily occupied with preserving their country's sovereignty and independence, while being surrounded by larger, more powerful neighbours — including being physically caught in the middle of the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry. Consequently, Qatar's foreign, defence and security policy is seen as guided by two central objectives: to prevent a scenario in which Qatar is attacked by one of its neighbours akin to Kuwait's fate in 1990; and to prevent regional conflict from affecting its LNG exports through the Gulf.¹⁹⁶

Kamrava¹⁹⁷ and Roberts¹⁹⁸ both explain how these three factors — the personalities of its leadership, its role as a global energy supplier, and its security environment — have shaped the contours of Qatar's foreign policy. Most importantly, they show that Qatar has sought security primarily in building ties with countries outside the MENA region. LNG exports have facilitated the establishment of bilateral relationships with countries around the world. Qatar has sought to further strengthen economic ties, particularly with western countries, through purchases of modern defence equipment and by becoming a prolific international investor. Moreover, Qatar has also worked to raise its regional and international profile by distributing aid and development assistance; establishing the Al-Jazeera network and supporting other media organisations; hosting international events and sports tournaments (including

¹⁹³ Roberts, *Qatar*.

¹⁹⁴ See for example: Kamrava, *Qatar*, Chapter 4; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Domestic Implications of the Arab Uprisings in the Gulf," *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Ana Echagüe (Madrid: FRIDE, 2013), 35-45; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Perceptions and Divisions in Security and Defense Structures in Arab Gulf States," *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 19-36; For a more general discussion of the resilience of Gulf monarchies see: Victor Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs," *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012), 707-722.

¹⁹⁵ Davidson, *After the Sheikhs*.

¹⁹⁶ For the most comprehensive discussions of this see: Roberts, *Qatar*; Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*.

¹⁹⁷ Kamrava, *Qatar*.

¹⁹⁸ Roberts, *Qatar*.

successfully bidding for the 2022 FIFA World Cup), and investing in famous brands and sports teams around the world; and funding various high-profile diplomatic initiatives. Several authors highlight Qatar's ambition to act as a mediator and facilitator of dialogue, even with countries and non-state actors others prefer to shun (e.g. engagement with Iran and Israel, or with Hamas and the Taliban).¹⁹⁹ In particular, Qatar is understood as seeking to present itself as an interlocutor between its western partners, particularly the US, and the Muslim world, especially Islamist-leaning groups.²⁰⁰ Roberts explains that through this combination of energy exports, investments and activist diplomacy, Qatar has sought to make itself relevant and useful to powerful countries around the world, aiming to give them a stake in its continued survival.²⁰¹

There is agreement that the USA has been Qatar's most important bilateral partner. Several authors outline how Qatar has consciously worked to become a key enabler of the US military presence in the MENA. This effort has been centred around the Al-Udaid Airbase and Camp Al-Sayliyah, which have hosted US troops and the forward headquarters of the US Central Command since the early 2000s, and served as a staging post for US military activities in the region, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Qatari's leadership calculated that by hosting the world's most powerful military it could deter major attacks from potential external enemies. Additionally, Qatar has also built close defence relationships with the UK, France and Turkey, and at least signalled interests in purchasing Russian arms. The consensus in the literature is that while characteristic of Qatar's approach to seek friendly relations with as many countries as possible and hedge against changes in US policies, these ties ultimately pale in comparison with the centrality of the relationship with the USA in Qatari security calculations.²⁰²

5. 4. 2. Qatar's Foreign Policy and Islamism

The arguably most discussed aspect of Qatar's foreign policy is its engagement with Islamist groups in the MENA, especially those linked to the MB.

¹⁹⁹ For useful overviews of the successes, limitations and failures of Qatar's mediation efforts during the 2000s see: Sultan Barakat, "The Qatari Spring: Qatar's Emerging Role in Peacemaking," (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012); Sultan Barakat, *Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014); Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011), 539-556.

²⁰⁰ See publications by Roberts, Kamrava, Ulrichsen and others cited throughout this section

²⁰¹ This is the central argument in: Roberts, *Qatar*.

²⁰² Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations"; Fromherz, *Qatar*; Kamrava, *Qatar*; Roberts, *Qatar*; Samaan, *Strategic Hedging*.

The debate about whether Doha's relationship with these groups reflects an ideological alignment or a more pragmatic choice features in most accounts of Qatar's behaviour in the region during the 2010s. Hammond's description of Doha as "a mini Ikhwanistan, an oasis of Islamism"²⁰³ is emblematic of a view that sees Qatar as ideologically committed to promoting political Islam across the region, but most scholars present more nuanced conclusions. They find that Qatar's well-documented engagement with Islamist groups and parties — including some employing violence (e.g. Hamas, factions of the Syrian opposition etc.) — is not indicative of the Qatari leadership's ideological convictions, much less a grand Qatari vision of a regional Islamist project. They see Qatar's leaders as more sympathetic to, and less personally concerned about, the MB's political ideology than many of the region's other ruling elites, but mostly characterise the relationship as driven by history, pragmatism, happenstance, and a degree of naivety.²⁰⁴

Freer²⁰⁵ and Krieg²⁰⁶ explain that conservative Islamic social values and sympathy for political rule based on notions of Islamically-rooted social justice are widespread amongst Qatari society. Yet, they also note that Qatar's ruling elite, which can be regarded as less conservative than the population at large, has never perceived the MB as a direct threat (the local MB chapter disbanded in 1999); it can therefore be understood as less hostile to political Islam than others, but not as driven by Islamist principles itself. Authors commonly recount that MB members from various Arab countries have settled and worked as expats in Qatar for decades. In the 1950s and 60s, they were welcomed as well-educated white-collar workers and employed to help staff ministries, education institutions and companies.²⁰⁷ While this was true in other Gulf states as well, Roberts explains that Qatari leaders have long made a particular effort

²⁰³ Andrew Hammond, "Arab Awakening: Qatar's Controversial Alliance with Arab Islamists," *OpenDemocracy*, 25 April 2013, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia-qatars-controversial-alliance-with-arab-islamists/>. [accessed 3 March 2019].

²⁰⁴ See for example: Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam"; Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections"; Hedges and Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood"; Andreas Krieg, "The Weaponization of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 91-108; David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (2014), 84-94; David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the Brotherhood," *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2015), 23-32; David B. Roberts, "Qatar, the Ikhwan, and Transnational Relations in the Gulf," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 18 March 2015, available at: <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/18/qatar-the-ikhwan-and-transnational-relations-in-the-gulf/>. [accessed 4 March 2019]; David B. Roberts, "Reflecting on Qatar's 'Islamist' Soft Power," (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 2019); Steinberg, "Islamism in the Gulf."

²⁰⁵ Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections."

²⁰⁶ Krieg, "The Weaponization of Narratives."

²⁰⁷ Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Hedges and Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood."

to present their country as a refuge for dissidents of various political persuasions (including, but not limited to, Islamists) from across the region. He describes how in the Qatari narrative the notion of Qatar as a 'Kaaba of the dispossessed,' where exiles can congregate, is traced back to a poem by Qatar's founding father Jassim bin Mohammed Al-Thani (in power from 1878-1913).²⁰⁸

The personal ties between Qatar's leadership and some of these expats became an increasingly visible and consequential factor in Qatar's foreign policy during the Arab Uprisings. Several individuals became key interlocutors for Qatar's government, which was eager to influence developments in countries like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt or Syria.²⁰⁹ Qatar's support for specific rebel factions in Libya, for example, is seen as having been more influenced by Qatar's relationship with the Al-Sallabi brothers, than strategic calculations.²¹⁰ The tendency to back Islamist groups was reinforced by the impression that they were winning popular support, including in elections. Several authors also argue that Qatar's reliance on these personal relationships was influenced by a lack of institutional and bureaucratic capacity to support its ambitious foreign policy agenda. They note that this had also contributed to limiting the effectiveness of Qatari mediation efforts, particularly with regard to ensuring the long-term implementation of negotiated agreements.²¹¹ It is important to note that the authors cited in the preceding paragraphs do not absolve Qatar of the responsibility for having on occasion provided support for extremist groups, be it wittingly or unwittingly. They note that at least in the contexts of the wars in Syria and Libya a combination of negligence and a sometimes wilfully naive laissez-faire attitude has allowed extremist groups to gain access to resources they might otherwise not have had. This also extends to allowing individuals

²⁰⁸ Roberts, *Qatar*, 33.

²⁰⁹ Echagüe, "Qatar: The Opportunist"; Roberts, *Qatar*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles"; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications," (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

²¹⁰ Gaub, "From Doha with Love"; David B. Roberts, "Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 September 2011, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2011-09-28/behind-qatars-intervention-libya>. [accessed 12 March 2019].

²¹¹ The limited capacity argument is discussed by many authors in the field. Examples include: Barakat, "The Qatari Spring"; Mehran Kamrava, "The Foreign Policy of Qatar," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 157-84; David B. Roberts, "Qatar's Foreign Policy Adventurism," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 June 2013, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/qatar/2013-06-25/qatars-foreign-policy-adventurism>. [12 March 2019]; Roberts, "Reflecting on Qatar's 'Islamist' Soft Power."

widely regarded as extremists to broadcast statements on Qatari news outlets.²¹²

5. 4. 3. 2011-2020: The Rise and Decline of Qatar's Regional Influence

As noted above, based on the literature, Qatar's foreign policy behaviour during the 2010s can be divided into three main periods. The period from the Arab Uprisings to mid-2013 saw the peak of Qatar's regional activism; Qatar reached the "at least temporary status as a regional 'power'."²¹³ Several scholars have contributed comprehensive overviews of this time;²¹⁴ other publications detail Qatar's approach to specific countries.²¹⁵ Throughout, Qatar is described as abandoning its appearance as a natural mediator, and openly picking sides in emerging conflicts across the region. It actively supported regime change in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria, worked with the GCC to facilitate a transition of power in Yemen, and supported fellow monarchies in Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Bahrain. It did so by providing financial assistance to governments — new and old -- and opposition groups; facilitating and hosting meetings between opposition groups and international supporters; transferring weapons to rebels in Libya and Syria; and even deploying its own military in Libya. Al-Jazeera covered developments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria in great detail and gave a platform to newly emerging voices in these countries, while limiting its coverage of events in Bahrain, for example. Several authors have focused on Qatar's involvement in Libya, in particular, as a case study including all of these aspects.²¹⁶ Stephens and others highlight the Arab League Summit in Doha in March 2013 as the symbolic high-point of Qatar's regional influence: Both Egypt and Syria, the traditional heavyweights of Arab politics, were for the first — and ultimately only — time represented by Qatar's close allies President Morsi and Moaz Al-Khatib (Head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces), respectively. Qatar appeared as one of the region's

²¹² Echagüe, "Qatar: The Opportunist"; Roberts, *Qatar*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles"; Ulrichsen, "Qatar and the Arab Spring."

²¹³ Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War."

²¹⁴ For example: Echagüe, "Qatar: The Opportunist"; Gaub, *The Gulf Moment*; Kamrava, *Qatar*; Roberts, *Qatar*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

²¹⁵ For example about Syria: Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*; Michael Stephens, "What Does Qatar Want in Syria," *OpenDemocracy*, 5 August 2012, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/what-does-qatar-want-in-syria/>. [accessed 12 March 2019]; and about states in North Africa: Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah."

²¹⁶ El-Gomati, "The Libyan Revolution Undone"; Gaub, "From Doha with Love"; Roberts, "Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya"; Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Roles."

foremost diplomatic powers and a crucial partner of various important Arab states.²¹⁷

The second period, the four years between Tamim bin Hamad's succession and the 2017 Gulf Crisis, is generally described as a time during which Qatar's activism and influence in the region gradually diminished — partly by choice, partly due to external circumstances. As noted above, Tamim bin Hamad consciously sought to concentrate more on domestic affairs. However, analysts tend to agree that this represented a change in emphasis and resource allocation, rather than a break with the basic tenets and direction of Qatar's foreign policy. Simultaneously, Qatar and its partners across the region suffered a series of setbacks during the first year of the new Emir's reign; Roberts has dubbed 2013/14 Qatar's "annus horribilis."²¹⁸ In Egypt, President Morsi was overthrown and replaced by a government that accused Qatar of supporting terrorism via the MB.²¹⁹ In Syria, Qatar was disappointed by the Obama administration's refusal to intervene militarily after the regime's use of chemical weapons, and as Saudi Arabia stepped up its engagement with the Syrian opposition, Qatar's allies lost influence.²²⁰ In Libya, Qatar's perceived support for Islamist factions had provoked opposition both within Libya and from other regional powers, particularly the UAE and Egypt.²²¹ From March to November 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt withdrew their ambassadors from Doha, demanding Qatar change its regional policies, a precursor to the 2017 Gulf Crisis.²²² Qatar made some concessions — closing Al-Jazeera's Egypt channel and getting several senior MB officials to relocate to Turkey, for example — but also continued working with its partners in Syria and Libya, albeit at a reduced level.²²³ Several authors also argue that the relative decline of Qatar's regional influence after 2013 also came as a result of increased interventions in the MENA by global powers, including Russia in Syria and the US-led coalition against Daesh.²²⁴

²¹⁷ Stephens, "The Arab League Actually Does Something"; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux." See also: Ian Black, "Qatar Orchestrates Unity at the Doha 'Summit of the Syrian Seat'," *The Guardian*, 27 March 2013, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2013/mar/27/syria-khatib-qatar-palestine>. [accessed 12 March 2019].

²¹⁸ Roberts, *Qatar*, 151-156.

²¹⁹ Hellyer, *A Revolution Undone*; Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers*.

²²⁰ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

²²¹ El-Gomati, "The Libyan Revolution Undone"; Frederic Wehrey, "Is Libya a Proxy War," *POMEPS Studies* 11 (2015), 45-48.

²²² Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 43-66.

²²³ Ibid.; as well as others cited in these paragraphs.

²²⁴ Roberts, *Qatar*; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux";

In the third period, beginning in June 2017, Qatar's foreign policy has focused first and foremost on surviving and overcoming the diplomatic and economic sanctions imposed on it by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. The Gulf Crisis, which was officially settled in January 2021, but without resolving many of the issues involved,²²⁵ has spawned much high-level scholarship of Qatari and regional politics.²²⁶ Qatar is described as doubling its efforts to cement relationships with global powers, particularly the USA and the other permanent UN Security Council members. In the MENA, Qatar strengthened its alignment with Turkey²²⁷ and expanded ties with Iran,²²⁸ while vocally condemning the regional policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This has included frequent criticism of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen, which Qatar had itself backed and joined in 2015. In Libya and Syria, Qatar maintained its relationships with the groups it had backed in previous years, but generally expressed its support for UN-led diplomatic initiatives. Ultimately, as Roberts argues, as the decade concluded, Qatar was trying to reorient its foreign policy to a posture resembling that of the 2000s, focusing on deepening various bilateral relationships through investments and other state-branding activities, and emphasising its diplomatic and mediation efforts, rather than intervening directly in regional conflicts — all while insisting on its right to maintain an independent foreign policy.²²⁹

5. 5. Conclusion

The literature shows that the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar — the MENA's most influential Arab states of the 2010s — have followed very different trajectories over the course of the decade. Their ambitions and abilities to shape developments across the region have waxed and waned at different times; their objectives have occasionally aligned, but they have also often worked against each other. Policy differences between Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha that often remained under the surface before 2011, have become

²²⁵ Michael Stephens, "Sunshine over the Gulf," *Royal United Services Institute*, 7 January 2021, available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/sunshine-over-gulf>. [accessed 10 March 2021].

²²⁶ Justin Gengler and Buthaina Al-Khelaifi, "Crisis, State Legitimacy, and Political Participation in a Non-Democracy: How Qatar Withstood the 2017 Blockade," *Middle East Journal* 73, no. 3 (2019), 397-416; Krieg, *Divided Gulf*; David B. Roberts, "Qatar Shuffles Back to the Future," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 13 December 2018, available at: <https://agsiw.org/qatar-shuffles-back-to-the-future/>. [accessed 12 March 2019]; Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

²²⁷ Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations."

²²⁸ Boussois, Sébastien. "Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement." Chap. 13 In *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, edited by Andreas Krieg, 216-32. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²²⁹ Roberts, "Qatar Shuffles Back to the Future."

glaringly apparent by the end of the decade. The 2017 Gulf Crisis was the most obvious manifestation of this; its official resolution in January 2021 saw a resumption of economic and diplomatic relations, but was not based on a resolution of many of the underlying issues.²³⁰

Since the thesis has an intentionally wide analytical focus, encompassing Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's foreign policies towards the region as a whole and throughout the decade of the 2010s, the chapter serves as a summary of, and signpost to, the many more detailed studies in the field that the analysis in the following chapters builds and relies on. The thesis analytical framework suggests that the three states' perceptions of the strategic environment in the MENA, and the ways they have understood their own positions in the region, shapes their conceptions of stability. The reviewed literature demonstrates both similarities and differences between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar that are relevant to this. All three are oil/gas-rich monarchies with long-standing security relationships with the USA, for example, but their evolutions as regional players differ, not least driven by the personalities of their most senior decision-makers, which, in turn, face their own unique domestic political and socio-economic circumstances.

It is also clear that amongst the three areas the analytical framework combines to arrive at their overall conceptions of stability in the MENA, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are seen to be most closely aligned with regard to their views about the role played by external powers in the region. There is agreement that all three were upset about what they understood as a lack of US engagement in the MENA after the Arab Uprisings, and were therefore keen to engage with other powers such as Russia and China. At the level of the regional order, the literature points to diverging priorities. Saudi Arabia was occupied with Iran; the UAE was concerned about forces promoting political Islam (including Turkey and Qatar); and Qatar focused on balancing between regional powers, seeking to preserve its independence. At the same time, Qatar is widely regarded as having been most supportive of revolutionary changes in the politics of various Arab states, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia were much wearier of the potential

²³⁰ See for example: Imad K. Harb et al., "The GCC Reconciliation: An Assessment," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 11 January 2021, available at: http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-gcc-reconciliation-an-assessment/. [accessed 10 March 2021]; Stephens, "Sunshine over the Gulf."

that these could bring hostile forces to the fore, earning them a label of counter-revolutionaries from some observers.

The following chapters seek to further draw out these differences and areas of alignment, consolidating some of the findings from the literature and offering additional conclusions about their overall perceptions and conceptions of instability and stability in the MENA, respectively. The thesis therefore stands alongside, and aims to build on, works such as Krieg's *Divided Gulf*,²³¹ Kamrava²³² and Ulrichsen's²³³ reviews of the changing international relations and security dynamics in the Gulf region, and Ulrichsen's study of the Gulf Crisis.²³⁴ Moreover, the thesis is also tied into the more general literature about the MENA's international relations. It examines where "the Gulf Moment," as evoked by Gaub²³⁵ and Abdulla,²³⁶ stands at the beginning of the 2020s, and adds to the literature about a New Middle East Cold War advanced by Lynch²³⁷ and others.²³⁸ Finally, the thesis' approach, which is primarily centred around examining the perspectives of the three countries as it is communicated in their own narratives, is similar to those taken by Roberts in an article contrasting the different regional visions of Hamad bin Khalifa of Qatar and Mohammed bin Zayed of the UAE,²³⁹ and Krieg's work analysis of how in their dispute with one another the Gulf states have weaponised narratives of regional order and security.²⁴⁰

²³¹ Krieg, *Divided Gulf*.

²³² Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*.

²³³ Ulrichsen, *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*.

²³⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

²³⁵ Gaub, *The Gulf Moment*.

²³⁶ Abdulla, *The Gulf Moment*.

²³⁷ Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*.

²³⁸ Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism"; Khoury, "The Arab Cold War Revisited"; Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War"; Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux"; Valbjorn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War."

²³⁹ Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE."

²⁴⁰ Krieg, "The Weaponization of Narratives."

6. Saudi Arabia's Perception of the Strategic Environment

Surrounded by 360 Degrees of Threats

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told *Time* magazine in 2018 that behind “any problem in the Middle East, you will find Iran.”¹ According to his portrayal, Iran had been pursuing a revisionist campaign for regional hegemony for decades. In the wake of Arab Uprisings, in particular, it had fomented and exploited instability across the region, causing chaos in Arab states and aiding the rise of extremist groups. The Crown Prince went so far as to describe the threat Iran posed to the Kingdom and the region as the main driver behind Saudi Arabia's long-standing international promotion of ultraconservative interpretations of Islam. In various interviews in 2017 and 2018,² he claimed that restrictive, religiously justified practices had only been introduced in Saudi Arabia after 1979 because “we didn't know how to deal with”³ Iran's efforts to export its Islamic revolution across the region.

The succession of King Salman in 2015 and the subsequent rise to power of his son and likely future king Mohammed bin Salman, signalled the beginning of a new era for Saudi Arabia and its regional foreign policy. This manifested itself, amongst other things, in the intervention in Yemen since 2015, the attempted political and economic isolation of Qatar (2017-2021), and a generally more strident rhetoric about regional affairs in which Saudi Arabia was depicted as leading the fight for a better, more stable future for the MENA. Yet, there was

¹ Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME About the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's Plans and President Trump,” interview by Time Editorial Team, *Time*, 5 April 2018, available at: <http://time.com/5228006/mohammed-bin-salman-interview-transcript-full/> [accessed 13 May 2020].

² Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “MBC Interviews Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman,” interview by Daoud Al-Sheryan, *MBC*, 3 May 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTu-gnfgfjU&frags=pl%2Cwn> [accessed 13 May 2020]; Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia's Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes,” interview by Norah O'Donnell, *CBS 60 Minutes*, 19 March 2018, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-talks-to-60-minutes/> [accessed 13 May 2020]; Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good',” interview by Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/> [accessed 18 April 2019]; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME”; Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests,” interview by Stephanie Flanders et al., *Bloomberg*, 5 October 2018, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-05/saudi-crown-prince-discusses-trump-aramco-arrests-transcript> [accessed 12 May 2020].

³ Martin Chulov, “‘I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam,’ Says Crown Prince,” *The Guardian*, 24 October 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>. [accessed 12 May 2020].

also much continuity. In fact, Saudi Arabia's perception of its strategic environment remained mostly consistent throughout the 2010s. Throughout, Riyadh identified Tehran as the main driver of instability in the region. It also saw a range of other challenges to its interests, but at least in its public narrative often tied these to Iran's regional behaviour.

This chapter establishes how Saudi Arabia made sense of the instability in the MENA during the 2010s; it identifies the Kingdom's diagnosis, as it were, of the problems in the region that it considered necessary to address to build an order that was more conducive to stability. The chapter argues that Saudi Arabia experienced the 2010s as a decade in which the regional order came undone at various levels. It saw the Arab world, with the Kingdom at its centre, as beset by enemies, and destabilised, betrayed and abandoned by supposed friends. In this environment, Saudi Arabia felt it necessary to assert itself to protect its national security and regional interests, to prevent the worst outgrowths of instability from taking root, and, eventually, to lead the region into what it considered a more secure future.

6. 1. The Big Picture Narrative

Saudi Arabia's big-picture narrative about the MENA during the 2010s, as articulated throughout the decade by the Kingdom's leaders and officials, and explained and amplified by academics, analysts and media commentators, told the story of a region riven by deep and progressively worsening insecurity and instability. It described how threats to the region's faltering regional order, and Saudi Arabia's national security, in particular, multiplied and intensified as various forces intent on fomenting and exploiting instability — many of which had been present in the region long before 2010 — were unleashed. Summarising the Kingdom's view of the MENA since the Arab Uprisings, Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the UK, said in late 2019: "Chaos definitely comes to mind."⁴

This chaos was, according to Saudi Arabia's narrative, the result of a confluence of factors: At the beginning of the decade, the Arab Uprisings overwhelmed several politically and economically weak states. Prince Turki Al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's former intelligence chief, a veteran diplomat, and over the

⁴ Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud (Saudi Ambassador to the UK), interview with author, 11 December 2019.

past decade a prolific public speaker explaining Saudi perspectives on regional and international affairs to audiences around the world, dubbed the Uprisings “the Arab troubles.”⁵ They created space for an array of malign forces intent on fomenting and exploiting instability across the region. Mohammed bin Salman identified these as a “triangle of evil”⁶ consisting of AQ and Daesh, the MB and its affiliates, and Iran, which was described by then Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir⁷ as “the single-most belligerent actor in the region.”⁸ The activities of the triangle were supported, wittingly and unwittingly, by Turkey and Qatar, who were selfishly promoting revolutionary change in Arab countries and, in the case of the latter, undermining much needed inter-Arab consensus. Finally, all of this was enabled by the USA’s inconsistent approach towards the MENA, which combined a dereliction of responsibility to maintaining regional security with policies that were actively driving instability.

Throughout, Saudi Arabia presented itself as the region’s steadfast, moderate centre, albeit with shifting points of emphasis as the decade progressed. Until 2015, while under the leadership of King Abdullah, the Saudi narrative characterised the Kingdom primarily as the sturdy “bulwark of the Middle East”⁹ that was standing “against civil strife and/or external interventions”¹⁰ in fellow Arab countries. After the succession in 2015, and particularly with the launch of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia portrayed itself as heading a coalition of Arab states — which, according to Mohammed bin Salman, included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE and Yemen — determined to build a prosperous and stable region.¹¹ Al-Jubeir depicted the Kingdom as the standard-bearer of a “vision of light”¹² facing down Iran’s “vision of darkness.”¹³ Saudi Arabia was taking responsibility for its region, just as its American and

⁵ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “The National Press Club: HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal,” (speech, The World Affairs Today, Washington DC, 24 February 2012), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJKmrrn_Lbog [accessed 18 April 2019].

⁶ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'.”

⁷ Adel Al-Jubeir served as Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia from 2015-2018; he was reassigned as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in December 2018.

⁸ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Can Iran Change?” *The New York Times*, 19 January 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-can-iran-change.html>. [accessed 12 May 2020].

⁹ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Failed Favouritism toward Israel,” *The Washington Post*, 10 June 2011, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/palestinian-rights-wont-be-denied-by-the-united-states-and-israel/2011/06/07/AGmnK2OH_story.html?utm_term=.10967ccee5b7. [accessed 12 May 2020].

¹⁰ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech by Turki Al-Faisal” (speech, 3rd Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, Berlin, 26 November 2013), available at: <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/mediathek/keynote-speech-by-prince-turki-al-faisal-at-the-3rd-berlin-foreign-policy-forum-656> [accessed 12 October 2020].

¹¹ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'.”

¹² Adel Al-Jubeir, “Finding a New Equilibrium in the Middle East,” (speech, World Economic Forum, Davos, 24 January 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI7QIAV0qsA> [accessed 14 May 2020].

¹³ *Ibid.*

European partners had asked of it for decades, which made it all the more frustrating that these same western powers were criticising its conduct in the war in Yemen, for example; in Al-Jubeir's words: "If you want us to lead, don't criticise us. And if you want us to play a supporting role, then tell us who is going to lead."¹⁴

Yet, for all the outward displays of confidence that "history has shown that light always prevails over darkness,"¹⁵ the 2010s were primarily described as a time of great danger with instability and threats encroaching on the Kingdom's borders from all sides. In 2016, Turki Al-Faisal assessed that there were "little credibly signs that call for much optimism."¹⁶ At the end of the decade, Khalid bin Bandar said that "very little is going our way"¹⁷ in the region, and Mohammed bin Salman declared that "we have 360 degrees of threats."¹⁸ A Saudi diplomat interviewed for this thesis described the view from Riyadh: "we look around and see all this chaos surrounding us. You look at the north, you look at the east, west, south, and there is all this instability."¹⁹

Throughout the decade, Saudi Arabia anchored its narrative about the 2010s in its interpretation of the MENA's modern history. It emphasised that instability in the region, as such, and resulting challenges to the Kingdom's national security, were not new; Turki Al-Faisal repeatedly described the MENA as a historically "conflict-cursed region."²⁰ Since its formation in the early 20th century, the region's state system had been undermined by meddling external powers, and threatened from within by a succession of radical, revolutionary and revisionist state- and non-state actors seeking power and hegemony. This had included

¹⁴ Adel Al-Jubeir, "I Don't Think World War III Is Going to Happen in Syria," interview by Samiha Shafy and Bernhard Zand, *Der Spiegel*, 19 February 2016, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir-on-syrian-war-a-1078337.html> [accessed 14 May 2020].

¹⁵ Al-Jubeir, "Finding a New Equilibrium."

¹⁶ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "The Middle East and its Future Directions," (speech, American University of Cairo, Cairo, 12 May 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvJadUdHW1w> [accessed 13 May 2020].

¹⁷ Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud," interview by Frank Gardner, *Royal United Services Institute*, 14 October 2019, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/event/conversation-hrh-prince-khalid-bin-bandar-al-saud-ambassador-kingdom-saudi-arabia-united> [accessed 12 May 2020].

¹⁸ Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, "Mohammad Bin Salman Denies Ordering Khashoggi Murder, but Says He Takes Responsibility for it," interview by Norah O'Donnell, *CBS 60 Minutes*, 29 September 2019, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mohammad-bin-salman-denies-ordering-khashoggi-murder-but-says-he-takes-responsibility-for-it-60-minutes-2019-09-29/> [accessed 14 May 2020].

¹⁹ Nawaf Althari (Senior Advisor to the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United Kingdom), interview with author, 6 December 2019.

²⁰ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech"; he used the same expression in 2016: Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Emerging Realities in the Middle East: A Saudi Perspective" (speech, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 9 November 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdgBCwmowKU> [accessed 12 October 2020].

Egypt championing pan-Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 60s (with the Arab-Israeli conflict as the defining issue of regional politics), Iraq's repeated attempts to annex Kuwait (in 1961 and 1990), various Islamist groups seeking to establish Islamic emirates, and Iran and its campaign to export its Islamic Revolution since 1979.²¹ Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, had always been the defender of the regional status quo, at least with regard to the region's system of sovereign and independent states. Occupying most of the Arabian Peninsula, the cradle of the Arab people and Islam, it was the natural centre of a predominantly Arab and Muslim region. Together with its status as the region's largest economy, owing to its position as a world-leading oil producer, this had always bestowed unique regional leadership responsibilities and privileges upon the Saudi monarchy.²²

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia described the MENA as descending into "a state of turmoil as never before"²³ during the 2010s, with the Kingdom as the only traditional Arab power left standing. Iraq had fallen "under the sway of Iran"²⁴ after the US-led invasion in 2003;²⁵ Syria had also come under increasing Iranian influence during the 2000s and even more so after 2011;²⁶ and Egypt had been largely disabled as a regional power by its internal problems following the Arab Uprisings.²⁷

²¹ Al-Jubeir, "I Don't Think World War III Is Going to Happen in Syria"; T. F. Al-Saud, "The Middle East and Its Future Directions"; M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Arabia's Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes." Also discussed in interview with: Ali Shihabi (Saudi Commentator), phone interview with author, 16 April 2020.

²² Discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Gregory Gause (Professor, Bush School of Government, Texas A+M University), phone interview with author, 17 June 2019; John Jenkins (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 18 April 2019; Saudi Academic, phone interview with author, 11 May 2020; Saudi Journalist, phone interview with author, 22 November 2019; Shihabi, interview with author; Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 15 February 2019.

²³ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal" (speech, 26th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 19 October 2017), available at: <https://ncusar.org/aa/2017/10/the-middle-east-today-where-to/> [accessed 17 June 2019].

²⁴ Mohamed bin Nawaf Al-Saud, "No One Should Meddle in Iraq's Affairs," *The Statesman*, 21 June 2014; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Viewpoint with James Zogby: Prince Turki Al-Faisal," interview by James Zogby, *Viewpoint with James Zogby*, 15 September 2011, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i7wq6EQ9G8> [accessed 10 May 2020].

²⁵ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Shared Security Challenges and Opportunities," (speech, Israel Policy Forum, Los Angeles, 23 October 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXM-atXcQkA> [accessed 14 May 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

²⁶ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME," Saud Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal Speech," (speech, Second Consultative Meeting of The Gulf Cooperation Council, Manama, 7 January 2013), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/Committees/Pages/ArticleID20137113382757.aspx> [accessed 15 May 2020].

²⁷ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal," (speech, 22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 22 October 2013), available at: <https://ncusar.org/programs/13-transcripts/2013-10-22-hrh-prince-turki-keynote.pdf> [accessed 16 May 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: Saudi Journalist, interview with author.

In Saudi Arabia's narrative, the Arab Uprisings themselves were described primarily as revealing the economic mismanagement of the region's republics. They had "failed to provide for their people."²⁸ In Libya, for example, the country's natural resources wealth had not been "directed towards the growth of the people, and you can see the results."²⁹ The region's monarchies, meanwhile, including the Kingdom itself, were also facing socio-economic challenges and demands from growing, young populations, but they enjoyed a different form of popular legitimacy than the republics, based on "tribal loyalties, family loyalties, blood loyalties."³⁰ The presidents of Arab republics, on the other hand, had lost the popular support once wrested in ruling institutions, often the military or security services, by trying to establish their own family dynasties.³¹ Mohammed bin Salman assessed in 2016 that "any regime that did not represent its people collapsed in the Arab Spring,"³² and according to Khalid bin Bandar, "it doesn't matter how great and powerful you are, if you don't have buy-in, at some stage you are going to collapse."³³ The substantial popular protests in Bahrain were attributed not to the failings of the monarchy, but to long-standing Iranian interference on the island.³⁴ In general, however, the Arab Uprisings featured in Saudi Arabia's narrative primarily as misguided political movements that, with their revolutionary fervour, laid bare divisions in Arab societies and served as catalysts of instability and conflict that was then fomented and exploited by the malign forces of Mohammed bin Salman's "triangle of evil."³⁵

²⁸ Althari, interview with author.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

³¹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Shihabi, interview with author.

³² Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, "Transcript: Interview with Muhammad bin Salman," interview by The Economist Editorial Team, *The Economist*, 6 January 2016, available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/01/06/transcript-interview-with-muhammad-bin-salman> [accessed 12 May 2020].

³³ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

³⁴ T. F. Al-Saud, "Viewpoint"; T. F. Al-Saud, "The National Press Club"; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal," (speech, 23rd Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 28 October 2014), available at <https://ncusar.org/programs/14-transcripts/2014-10-28-prince-turki-keynote.pdf> [accessed 15 May 2020].

³⁵ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'"; see also: Adel Al-Jubeir, "Statement by Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir," (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 12 February 2016), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2016/video/statements-by-mohammad-ashraf-ghani-haider-al-abadi-and-adel-bin-ahmed-al-jubeir/filter/video/> [accessed 12 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal," (speech, 24th Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 14 October 2015), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKkTG-VG6Es&feature=youtu.be> [accessed 15 May 2020]. Also discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Former Saudi Diplomat, phone interview with author, 28 April 2020; Saudi Journalist, interview with author.

As noted above, Iran was the primary fix-point in Saudi Arabia’s narrative about instability in the MENA during the 2010s. It was described as pursuing an agenda of regional hegemony, a revisionist and ideology-fuelled “grand project of pax-Iranica.”³⁶ It was deliberately “stoking sectarianism”³⁷ and creating “a fertile environment for extremism and terrorism”³⁸ in Arab states to first destabilise, and then take control of them via proxy groups loyal to Tehran.³⁹ According to Al-Jubeir, “the Iranians are on a rampage and have been on a rampage since 1979”⁴⁰ that had accelerated in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the chaotic aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Over the decades Iran had thereby gained control over Lebanon,⁴¹ Iraq⁴² and Syria,⁴³ and attempted to do the same in Bahrain⁴⁴ and Yemen.⁴⁵ Throughout, it had also sought to destabilise Saudi Arabia — according to Mohammed bin Salman, Iran has sought to drag the Kingdom into “a war scenario,”⁴⁶ in which “reaching the Muslim’s qibla [i.e. Islam’s holiest site in Mecca] is a major aim for the Iranian regime.”⁴⁷ In this context, Saudi Arabia had been forced to intervene in Yemen, “a war that was imposed on us,”⁴⁸ to prevent the Iranian-backed Houthis from becoming a “new Hizbollah in the Arabian Peninsula”⁴⁹ whose missiles were

³⁶ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech.”

³⁷ Adel Al-Jubeir, “What’s Next in Us-Saudi Relations,” (speech, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 22 March 2018), available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/whats-next-u-s-saudi-relations-he-adel-al-jubeir/> [accessed 14 May 2020].

³⁸ Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Speech of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” (speech, 15th GCC Consultative Meeting, Riyadh, 5 June 2015), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/ArabLeague/Pages/ArticleID2013327151518658.aspx> [accessed 17 May 2020].

³⁹ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia’s Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes”; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Sky News Arabia Debate,” (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, Bahrain, 19 December 2017), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2017-c364/debate-e171/sky-news-arabia-debate-english-39af> [accessed 14 May 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

⁴⁰ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy Priorities,” interview by Robin Niblett, *Chatham House*, 21 October 2019, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/saudi-arabias-foreign-policy-priorities> [accessed 12 May 2020].

⁴¹ Adel Al-Jubeir, “CNBC Transcript: Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel Al-Jubeir,” interview by Hadley Gamble, *CNBC*, 9 November 2017, available at: <https://www.cnbcm.com/2017/11/09/cnbc-transcript-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir.html> [accessed 17 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy Doctrine after the Arab Awakening,” interviewed by Nicholas Burns, *Middle East Initiative Speaker Series*, Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 25 April 2013, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRYvOI2Ze9w> [accessed 16 May 2020].

⁴² T. F. Al-Saud, “Shared Security Challenges and Opportunities.” Also discussed in interview with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

⁴³ S. F. Al-Saud, “HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal Speech”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

⁴⁴ T. F. Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy Doctrine.”

⁴⁵ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Briefing by Saudi Foreign Minister,” (speech, Royal United Services Institute, 20 June 2019), available at: <https://rusi.org/event/briefing-saudi-foreign-minister-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir> [accessed 18 May 2020]; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad Bin Salman.”

⁴⁶ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’.”

⁴⁷ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “MBC Interviews Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.”

⁴⁸ Al-Jubeir, “What’s Next.”

⁴⁹ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests.”

targeting not just Saudi cities, but also globally important sea lanes — “a red line not only for Saudi Arabia, but for the whole world.”⁵⁰ Direct talks with Tehran, meanwhile, were rejected because Iran had no right to “interfere in the affairs”⁵¹ of Arab countries in the first place, or dismissed as pointless due to the Iranian regime’s ideology and duplicitous nature: “the people who want to talk to you can’t deliver, and the people who can deliver don’t want to talk.”⁵²

In Saudi Arabia’s narrative, AQ and Daesh gained strength and influence during the 2010s by capitalising on the absence of strong state authorities after the Arab Uprisings and — most importantly — the sectarian oppression of Sunni populations by the Iranian-backed governments of Syria and Iraq. “Fix Damascus and Baghdad,” Turki Al-Faisal said in 2015, and Daesh “will wither away.”⁵³ Saudi Arabia itself was described as the ultimate target of these groups — as demonstrated by AQ’s terror campaign in the Kingdom in the mid-2000s, and Daesh’s attacks on Saudi soil and sharp anti-Saudi rhetoric during the 2010s — and therefore a committed regional leader in the war against them.⁵⁴ In fact, as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the Saudi government had a special responsibility to defend Islam against extremist attempts to hijack it.⁵⁵ Any suggestions that Saudi Arabia’s own religious conservatism was linked to the ideology espoused by AQ and Daesh was dismissed;⁵⁶ and any possible involvement by the Saudi government in tolerating or supporting sectarian and extremist views explained as a misguided reaction to pressure from Iran’s Islamic Revolution (as in Mohammed bin Salman’s argument cited above).⁵⁷ Finally, Saudi Arabia also consistently emphasised that terrorism in the MENA was not an exclusively Sunni phenomenon, but was also perpetrated by Iran’s

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Interview,” interview by Michael Stephens, *Royal United Services Institute*, 20 June 2019, available at: <https://rusi.org/event/briefing-saudi-foreign-minister-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir> [accessed 16 May 2020].

⁵² K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH.”

⁵³ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote,” (24th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

⁵⁴ Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Saud, “Speech of His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz Bin Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, Head of the Delegation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” (speech, General Debate of the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 28 September 2012), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/67/saudi-arabia> [accessed 12 May 2020]; Mohammed bin Nawaf Al-Saud, “This Plague Upon Our Region Threatens Saudi Arabia,” *The Times*, 26 September 2014.

⁵⁵ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote,” (26th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

⁵⁶ Al-Jubeir, “I Don’t Think World War III Is Going to Happen in Syria”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’.”

⁵⁷ Chulov, “I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam’.”

various proxy groups.⁵⁸ In 2018, Al-Jubeir declared that Hizbollah “is today the world’s most dangerous terrorist organisation.”⁵⁹

In 2014, Saudi Arabia designated the MB a terrorist organisation, describing it as promoting an extremist ideology only marginally different to that of AQ and Daesh.⁶⁰ According to Mohammed bin Salman, “if you see any terrorist, you will find that he used to be from the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁶¹ The Saudi narrative consistently depicted the MB as a subversive transnational movement with a revisionist agenda to undermine states throughout the region, including the Kingdom itself.⁶² In Egypt, in particular, the Brotherhood had revealed its nefarious nature, “ramming through a constitution”⁶³ to solidify its power and seeking to influence the politics of other Arab states. The overthrow of its government in 2013 was therefore necessary to “save the Egyptian state from disaster”⁶⁴ and enable Egypt to reclaim its status as a pillar of the regional order.

The accumulation of power and influence by the MB and its affiliates, and the destabilisation of various Arab states during and after the Arab Uprisings, more generally, was, in Saudi Arabia’s narrative, encouraged by the irresponsible policies of Qatar and Turkey. Both had fanned the revolutionary flames across the region to achieve regional influence far beyond their station. Qatar had even sought to undermine the security of its neighbours in the Gulf, “sponsoring radicals”⁶⁵ belonging to the MB and other Islamist groups, offering them and other dissidents shelter in Doha and a public platform on *Al-Jazeera*.⁶⁶ Turkey had been working with Qatar, while pursuing the “hegemonic inclinations”⁶⁷ of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The latter was trying to besmirch the Kingdom’s leadership by exploiting the controversy around the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 to serve his own interests.⁶⁸ Both Qatar and

⁵⁸ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote,” (23rd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

⁵⁹ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Statement - Saudi Arabia,” (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 18 February 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XK-1gP10gQg> [accessed 13 May 2020].

⁶⁰ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

⁶³ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech.”

⁶⁴ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote,” (22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

⁶⁵ Adel Al-Jubeir, “A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir,” interview by Isobel Coleman, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 September 2011, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir> [accessed 16 May 2020].

⁶⁶ Ibid.; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests.”

⁶⁷ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Full Interview,” interview by Hadley Gamble, *CNBC*, 13 October 2019, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BV2nwr-Q4k8> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁶⁸ Saudi Journalist, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author.

Turkey's regional policies had also contributed to paralysing regional institutions. Qatar had sabotaged the GCC, substantially weakening Gulf unity vis-a-vis Iran.⁶⁹ It had also added to discord in the Arab League, which was already undermined by some of its members' dependency on Iran — most notably Iraq and Lebanon (the Syrian government was suspended from the organisation in 2013).⁷⁰ The same was true for the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, where Turkish intransigence was also a factor.⁷¹

Finally, in Saudi Arabia's narrative, the MENA's descent into instability was enabled by the ineffectiveness of global institutions in addressing conflicts in the region, and — most importantly — the regional policies of the USA. In 2013, the Kingdom refused to take up a temporary UN Security Council seat, protesting international paralysis regarding the war in Syria.⁷² The US, meanwhile, had relinquished its "world leadership"⁷³ and in the MENA left behind a "strategic void"⁷⁴ that the above described nefarious actors could fill. The Obama administration, in particular, had turned its back on Saudi Arabia, despite "the Kingdom's 80 years of constant friendship with America."⁷⁵ Even worse, it had, in the words of Mohammed bin Salman, "worked against our agenda."⁷⁶ After the Bush administration had destabilised Iraq,⁷⁷ Obama's policies contributed to a further dismantling of the regional order by calling on President Mubarak to step down and tolerating the rise of the MB in Egypt;⁷⁸ by taking only selective action in Syria (i.e. only targeting Daesh, not the Syrian regime);⁷⁹ and by engaging with Iran in all the wrong ways. Saudi leaders and officials officially

⁶⁹ Al-Jubeir, "What's Next"; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (26th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference). Also discussed in interview with: Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author.

⁷⁰ Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, "Speech of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," (speech, 24th Arab Summit, Doha, 30 March 2013), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/ArabLeague/Pages/ArticleID2013327151518658.aspx> [accessed 14 May 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, "The Middle East and Its Future Directions." Also discussed in interview with: Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author.

⁷¹ Fahim Al-Hamid, "Erdogan and His Mercenaries Were Disappointed and Lost [أردوغان ومرترقته .. خابوا وخسروا]," *Okaz*, 22 December 2019, available at: <https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/local/2001796>. [accessed 15 May 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author.

⁷² S. F. Al-Saud, "HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal Speech"; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

⁷³ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech."

⁷⁴ Saudi Academic, interview with author.

⁷⁵ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Mr. Obama, We Are Not 'Free Riders'," *Arab News*, 14 March 2016, available at: <http://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/894826>. [accessed 14 May 2020].

⁷⁶ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests."

⁷⁷ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME." Also discussed in interview with: Stephens, interview with author.

⁷⁸ T. F. Al-Saud, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Doctrine"; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech."

⁷⁹ Adel Al-Jubeir, "A View from Saudi Arabia." (speech, Mediterranean Dialogues 2017, Rome, 2 December 2017), available at: <https://2017.med.ispionline.it/speeches/a-view-from-saudi-arabia/> [accessed 18 May 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (24th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

endorsed the JCPOA,⁸⁰ but after Obama's departure described it as an act of "appeasement."⁸¹ They had always insisted that the agreement was flawed; the negotiation processes should have included the GCC,⁸² and its scope should have extended beyond the nuclear file to Iran's regional behaviour. Turki Al-Faisal said in 2013: "sectarianising our region is no less threatening and destructive than a nuclear weapon."⁸³ Furthermore, Obama's comments in 2016 describing the Gulf states as security "free riders"⁸⁴ and calling on Saudi Arabia to "share the neighbourhood"⁸⁵ with Iran, only added "insult to injury"⁸⁶ by seemingly equating the Saudi monarchy, a long-time US partner, with "an Iranian leadership that continues to describe America as the biggest enemy."⁸⁷ The Saudi narrative about the Trump administration was more favourable — Mohammed bin Salman said about Trump in 2018: "I love working with him."⁸⁸ It was particularly enthusiastic about the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and renewed sanctions campaign against Iran.⁸⁹ But it also continued to bemoan a lack of interest, consistency and clarity in Washington's approach to the region.⁹⁰

⁸⁰ Adel Al-Jubeir, "The Region after the Nuclear Negotiations," (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 31 October 2015), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2015-0220/plenary2-41e0/al-jubeir-1b08> [accessed 16 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Panel Discussion - Mali, Syria, and Beyond: Dealing with the Current Crises," (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 3 February 2013), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2013/video/panel-discussion-mali-syria-and-beyond-dealing-with-the-current-crises/filter/video/> [accessed 15 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "US-Iran Talks in Geneva & the Roles of Israel and Saudi Arabia," (speech, NIAC Leadership Conference, Washington DC, 15 October 2013), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxONZ7dRS4c> [accessed 15 May 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech"; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "A Conversation on Security and Peace in the Middle East," (speech Weinberg Founders Conference, The Washington Institute, Washington DC, 6 May 2016), available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/conversation-security-and-peace-middle-east> [accessed 13 May 2020].

⁸¹ Khalid bin Salman Al-Saud, "Why Iran's Malign Behavior Must Be Confronted - Not Appeased," *Arab News*, 23 July 2018, available at: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1343571>. [accessed 16 May 2020].

⁸² Al-Jubeir, "The Region after the Nuclear Negotiations"; T. F. Al-Saud, "US-Iran Talks in Geneva"; T. F. Al-Saud, "A Conversation on Security and Peace."

⁸³ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech."

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> [accessed 15 September 2019].

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ T. F. Al-Saud, "Mr. Obama."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests."

⁸⁹ Al-Jubeir, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Priorities"; Adel Al-Jubeir, "In Conversation with HE Adel Al-Jubeir, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia," interview by Robin Niblett (Chatham House London Conference, London, 24 October 2017), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xw4AWD_7Dl4 [accessed 15 May 2020]; Adel Al-Jubeir, "Statement by Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir," (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 19 February 2017), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2017/video/statement-by-adel-bin-ahmed-al-jubeir/filter/video/> [accessed 12 May 2020]; K. b. S. Al-Saud, "Why Iran's Malign Behavior Must Be Confronted"; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "John Fredericks Sits Down with Prince Turki Al Faisal," interview by John Fredericks, *John Fredericks Show*, 20 October 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG2aaPvNNuU> [accessed 17 May 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, "Shared Security Challenges and Opportunities."

⁹⁰ Al-Jubeir, "Finding a New Equilibrium"; Al-Jubeir, "What's Next"; T. F. Al-Saud, "Full Interview."

In sum, Saudi Arabia's big picture narrative about the MENA during the 2010s described the Kingdom as being confronted with "the hell that is around us"⁹¹ and having to try to "rectify the power imbalance vis-a-vis Iran"⁹² in the region. In the first half of the decade, it often pointed to the conflict in Syria as the primary manifestation of the region's ills, describing it as "a forest fire out of control"⁹³ fuelled by Iranian meddling, giving rise to terrorist groups, and enabled by the Obama administration's "dithering leadership."⁹⁴ In the second half of the decade, the focus shifted to Yemen, not least reflecting the sense that threats in the region were coming ever closer to the Kingdom. Here, Saudi Arabia was having to fight a war of necessity, not choice,⁹⁵ against a militia equipped by Iran and loyal to its supreme leader, "the Hitler of the Middle East."⁹⁶

6. 2. Drivers of Instability and Disorder

In its big-picture narrative about the MENA during the 2010s, Saudi Arabia told the story of instability in the Middle East in the way it wanted it to be heard, including with occasional rhetorical flourishes. Consequently, it does not necessarily reflect the Kingdom's full perception of the strategic environment. This section therefore specifically analyses what Saudi Arabia assessed as the main drivers of instability in the MENA. It re-examines the various factors contained in the Saudi narrative, but also adds detail and nuance based on the further inspection of statements by Saudi leaders and officials, interviews with experts and observers, and Saudi Arabia's behaviour in the region during the decade.

6. 2. 1. Socio-Economic and Political Pressures

The Arab Uprisings surprised the Saudi government. Their suddenness and revolutionary intensity, and the struggles and failures of other Arab governments to contain them, confronted the Kingdom's leaders "with their own impermanence."⁹⁷ In the Saudi narrative, the factors Saudi Arabia assessed as

⁹¹ Althari, interview with author.

⁹² T. F. Al-Saud, "The Middle East and Its Future Directions."

⁹³ M. b. N. Al-Saud, "This Plague."

⁹⁴ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference); see also: S. F. Al-Saud, "HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal Speech"; T. F. Al-Saud, "The National Press Club."

⁹⁵ Al-Jubeir, "A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir"; Al-Jubeir, "What's Next."

⁹⁶ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'."

⁹⁷ Shadi Hamid (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019.

driving popular discontent — namely, socio-economic grievances and the lack of governments' popular legitimacy — were more acute in the region's republics than in the monarchies. The fact that even the less wealthy Arab monarchies in Jordan and Morocco did not face as much popular pressure as the Presidents of Egypt or Tunisia, and the blaming of the uprising in Bahrain on Iranian interference, appeared to confirm this interpretation. Moreover, Saudi Arabia could portray the way the Uprisings evolved as evidence of a growing alienation between the republics' presidents, many of whom were increasingly trying to shift power towards their own families, and their most important constituencies, namely the military and security institutions their regimes had emerged from. In 2011, Saudi Arabia saw how these institutions either refused to keep leaders power (e.g. in Egypt and Tunisia), or fractured with substantial factions backing the overthrow of their erstwhile commanders (e.g. in Yemen, Libya and, to a lesser extent, Syria).⁹⁸

Nevertheless, some of the domestic policies that were enacted in the Kingdom during the 2010s suggest that the government in Riyadh considered itself — and other monarchical systems in the region — far from immune from the pressures for change. A huge spending programme to bolster the welfare state and create public sector jobs in March 2011,⁹⁹ and the decision to allow women to participate in municipal elections and be appointed to the Shura Council, announced in September 2011,¹⁰⁰ indicated an effort to demonstrate that the Saudi state was listening to, and providing for its citizens. The Vision 2030 reform agenda, launched in 2016, can be also be understood as a result of the government's recognition that socio-economic development is necessary to ensure the future stability of the Kingdom.¹⁰¹ There was also a clear effort by the Saudi leadership to centralise power — and especially command over the military and security services — to secure the ongoing succession process that will likely culminate with Mohammed bin Salman becoming King.¹⁰² Further, the

⁹⁸ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Shihabi, interview with author.

⁹⁹ Jason Benham, "Saudi King Orders More Handouts, Security Boost," *Reuters*, 11 March 2011, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-king/saudi-king-orders-more-handouts-security-boost-idUSTRE72H2UQ20110318>. [accessed 11 May 2020].

¹⁰⁰ BBC, "Women in Saudi Arabia to Vote and Run in Elections," 25 September 2011, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15052030>. [accessed 11 May 2020].

¹⁰¹ Jenkins, interview with author.

¹⁰² Discussed in interviews with: Christian Koch (Senior Advisor, The Bussola Institute), phone interview with author, 18 April 2019; French Gulf Analyst, phone interview with author, 20 April 2020; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), phone interview with author, 17 May 2019; See also: Gregory Gause, "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & Co, 2018) 31-43.

steady increase in the promotion of Saudi nationalism throughout the decade,¹⁰³ and populist measures such as the detention of senior princes and businessmen on corruption charges in Riyadh's Riz-Carlton hotel in 2017,¹⁰⁴ which was widely regarded as popular amongst the population even as it risked of alienating elites and investor confidence,¹⁰⁵ can be seen as efforts by the Saudi leadership to further strengthen its ties with the people. In this context, Saudi Arabia also understood the media — both conventional and social media — as having the potential to mobilise populations, either in support of, or against, governments. Riyadh's anger about *Al-Jazeera's* coverage of regional affairs,¹⁰⁶ but also its own investments in media outlets and social media campaigns (directed at audiences at home and abroad),¹⁰⁷ was illustrative of this.¹⁰⁸

6. 2. 2. Iran

Besides this assessment of the socio-economic and political factors, Saudi Arabia identified a range of regional and international drivers of instability in the region. From Riyadh's perspective, these enabled, fomented, fuelled, and exploited the instability of individual states and thereby created the dangerous and unprecedented region-wide "state of turmoil"¹⁰⁹ described in its big-picture narrative.

There is no reason to doubt that Saudi Arabia genuinely regarded Iran as the most significant driver of instability in the MENA, both since 2011 and before. From the Kingdom's perspective, the 2010s were "a story of continuing Iranian

¹⁰³ Eman Alhoussein, "Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019); Madawi Al-Rasheed, "The New Populist Nationalism in Saudi Arabia: Imagined Utopia by Royal Decree," *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 5 May 2020, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/05/05/the-new-populist-nationalism-in-saudi-arabia-imagined-utopia-by-royal-decree/>. [accessed 18 May 2020]. Also discussed in interviews with: German Middle East Analyst, phone interview with author, 24 April 2019; Thomas Richter (Senior Research Fellow, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018.

¹⁰⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Arabia Arrests 11 Princes, Including Billionaire Alwaleed Bin Talal," *The New York Times*, 4 November 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-waleed-bin-talal.html>. [accessed 18 May 2020].

¹⁰⁵ Gause, "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges"; Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (London: William Collins, 2020).

¹⁰⁶ Al-Jubeir, "In Conversation with HE Adel Al-Jubeir." Also discussed in interview with: Althari, interview with author.

¹⁰⁷ See for example: Katie Benner et al., "Saudis' Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider," *The New York Times*, 20 October 2018, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/us/politics/saudi-image-campaign-twitter.html>. [accessed 19 May 2020]; Gause, "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges"; Sylvia Westall and Angus McDowall, "Saudi Arabia's Rulers Adapt Message for Social Media Age," *Reuters*, 24 May 2016, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-socialmedia/saudi-arabias-rulers-adapt-message-for-social-media-age-idUSKCN0YF1P0>. [accessed 19 May 2020].

¹⁰⁸ Discussed in interviews with: US Academic focusing on Saudi Arabia, phone interview with author, 22 November 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), interview with author.

¹⁰⁹ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (26th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

encroachment on the Arab world,”¹¹⁰ said one expert interviewed for this thesis; and a former senior British diplomat, who served in Riyadh during the decade, summarised that in the Saudi government’s perception of regional instability “all roads appear to lead to Iran.”¹¹¹ Saudi Arabia saw Iran work to establish hegemonic “control over the region,”¹¹² by following a “playbook”¹¹³ established over several decades. According to this understanding, Iran used local groups supported by its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to deepen divisions in Arab societies, stoking sectarianism and undermining a state’s monopoly of force within its borders. Iran then used resulting security crises as pretexts to further increase its involvement in these countries.¹¹⁴ In the words of Khalid bin Bandar, Iran wants “chaos, so things fall apart, so then they can rebuild.”¹¹⁵ Saudi Arabia saw Iran employ this strategy in states across the region, but also in the Kingdom itself, including by trying to sow discontent amongst Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority (e.g. with its condemnation of the execution in Saudi Arabia of Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr in 2016¹¹⁶); questioning the Saudi monarchy’s legitimacy as the protector of Islam’s holy sites; and sponsoring and conducting terrorist attacks and missile attacks against targets on Saudi soil.¹¹⁷ Saudi Arabia perceived what it understands to be Iran’s efforts to subvert the sovereignty of Arab states as at least as harmful to regional stability and its own security — if not more so — than the prospect of Tehran acquiring a nuclear weapon. It was therefore less concerned with the technical details of the JCPOA, and more with the fact that the agreement, and the rhetoric

¹¹⁰ Gause, interview with author.

¹¹¹ Former British Diplomat, phone interview with author, 29 March 2019. Several interviewees expressed very similar views: Former British Intelligence Officer, interview with author, 10 April 2019; Henner Fürtig (Director, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018; Steffen Hertog (Professor, London School of Economics), email interview with author, 8 April 2019; Thomas Lippman (Author of *Saudi Arabia on the Edge*), phone interview the author, 1 May 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), interview with author.

¹¹² K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹¹³ K. b. S. Al-Saud, “Why Iran’s Malign Behavior Must Be Confronted.”

¹¹⁴ Al-Jubeir, Adel. “Saudi Arabia’s Regional Foreign Policy Priorities.” Speech at Chatham House, London, 7 September 2016; K. b. S. Al-Saud, “Why Iran’s Malign Behavior Must Be Confronted”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia’s Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes”; S. b. A. Al-Saud, “Speech of the Custodian”; T. F. Al-Saud, “Panel Discussion.”

¹¹⁵ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹¹⁶ BBC, “Iran: Saudis Face ‘Divine Revenge’ for Executing Al-Nimr,” 3 January 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35216694>. [accessed 19 May 2020].

¹¹⁷ Adel Al-Jubeir, “CNBC Transcript: Interview with Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel Al-Jubeir,” interview by Hadley Gamble, *CNBC*, 5 January 2016, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/01/05/cnbc-transcript-interview-with-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir.html> [accessed 17 May 2020]; Al-Jubeir, “Can Iran Change?”; Al-Jubeir, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy Priorities”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad Bin Salman”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “MBC Interviews Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.”

surrounding it, particularly by the Obama administration, appeared to signal an international willingness to tolerate and normalise Iran's regional behaviour.¹¹⁸

The Saudi narrative about Iran's role as the region's greatest destabiliser contained some convenient simplifications, including with regard to timeline. Saudi leaders and officials often argued that Iran's problematic behaviour in "our region began with the Khomeini revolution in 1979."¹¹⁹ Yet, it had also seen the Iran ruled by the Shah as harbouring expansionist ambitions, not least demonstrated in its claim to Bahrain (only officially abandoned in 1970)¹²⁰ and its seizure of the Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs islands from the UAE in 1971.¹²¹ The key difference between the Shah and Khomeini, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, was that the former primarily represented a conventional threat, whereas the latter added an ideological and religious dimension that could directly appeal to Arab, particularly Shia, populations, including in the Kingdom itself.¹²²

6. 2. 3. Islamism and Extremism

Iran also loomed large in Saudi Arabia's narrative about the role jihadist groups like AQ and Daesh played in the MENA during the 2010s. Saudi Arabia perceived the proliferation and strengthening of these and other violent extremist groups as tied to their ability to capitalise on the instability and Iranian-sponsored sectarian oppression of Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria. It was therefore frustrated with the scope of the US-led military campaign against Daesh, supporting its objectives to destroy the group's proto-state, but criticising it for not also targeting the Syrian regime and tacitly cooperating with Iran and the Iraqi armed groups supported by Tehran.¹²³ Mohammed bin Salman's above cited argument that Iran's Islamic Revolution was at least indirectly responsible for the ultraconservative interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia itself

¹¹⁸ See for example: T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech." Also discussed in interviews with: Former British Government Official, interview with author, 25 February 2019; Stephens, interview with author.

¹¹⁹ Al-Jubeir, "Statement - Saudi Arabia."

¹²⁰ Rohan Alvandi, "Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question, 1968–1970," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 2 (2010), 159-77.

¹²¹ See for example: Kourosh Ahmadi, *Islands and International Politics in the Persian Gulf: The Abu Musa and Tunbs in Strategic Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

¹²² Discussed in interviews with: German Middle East Analyst, interview with author; Jenkins, interview with author; Thomas Juneau (Associate Professor, University of Ottawa), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019; UK-based Middle East Analyst (B), interview with author, 23 October 2019. For academic literature on the topic see: Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020); Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, iBooks, 2013).

¹²³ M. b. N. Al-Saud, "No One Should Meddle"; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (23rd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

represented a revisionist reading of history. However, it is also clear that, over the course of the decade, the Saudi government cracked down on any elements within the Saudi populations that were sympathetic or linked to AQ or Daesh.¹²⁴ In fact, the Crown Prince's comments, together with measures taken under his leadership, such as those curbing the powers of the Kingdom's religious police,¹²⁵ indicated that Riyadh assessed extremism as a threat and driver of instability — regardless of where it saw its origin. Ultimately, in Saudi Arabia's perception, the way in which jihadist groups such as AQ and Daesh contributed to regional instability was similar to how it saw the activities of Iran-aligned armed militias across the region. It understood the violence perpetrated by these groups, their advocacy for state-building projects disregarding existing borders, and their wholesale rejection of pro-western Arab governments as undermining the region's state system, including the Saudi state itself.¹²⁶

Saudi Arabia's view of the MB can be understood in a similar context. The Kingdom long considered the MB as a subversive transnational movement with a revisionist agenda to undermine state structures throughout the region.¹²⁷ This also had a domestic dimension: In 2011, the Saudi government saw MB-linked groupings amongst its own population, including renewed calls for reform from elements of the Sahwa movement,¹²⁸ as posing a potential threat to the Kingdom's political system.¹²⁹ Saudi Arabia designated the MB a terrorist organisation in 2014, claiming that its ideology was only marginally different

¹²⁴ Former British Intelligence Officer, interview with author. See also: Daniel Byman, "The U.S.-Saudi Arabia Counterterrorism Relationship," *Brookings*, 24 May 2016, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>. [accessed 19 May 2020]; Zaina Konbaz, "Saudi Security Forces Crack Down on Al-Qaeda and Islamic State," *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 20 (2014).

¹²⁵ Jenkins, interview with author. See also: BBC, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Police Ordered to Be 'Gentle,'" 13 April 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36034807>. [accessed 19 May 2020]; Sewell Chan, "Saudi Arabia Moves to Curb Its Feared Religious Police," *The New York Times*, 15 April 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/16/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-moves-to-curb-its-feared-religious-police.html>. [accessed 19 May 2020].

¹²⁶ A. b. A. Al-Saud, "Speech of His Royal Highness"; M. b. N. Al-Saud, "This Plague"; T. F. Al-Saud, "Emerging Realities."

¹²⁷ Discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Ian Black (Senior Visiting Fellow, London School of Economics), interview with author, 19 March 2019; Former British Intelligence Officer, interview with author; Former Senior British Diplomat, phone interview with author, 9 April 2019. See also: Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?" *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017), 129-53; Stephane Lacroix, Bernard Haykel and Thomas Hegghammer, eds., *Saudi Arabia in Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹²⁸ For the relationship between the Saudi state and the Sahwa movement see: Freer, *Rentier Islamism*; Hedges and Cafiero, "The Gcc and the Muslim Brotherhood"; Stephane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament," *POMEPS Studies* 7 (2014), 16-18.

¹²⁹ Discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Jens Heibach (Research Fellow, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018; Jenkins, interview with author; Haoues Taguia (Researcher, Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha), interview with author, 2 April 2018; Researcher at a UK Think Tank, interview with author, 9 April 2020.

from that of AQ and Daesh.¹³⁰ At least in part, however, the designation also reflected a tendency by the government in Riyadh to apply the terrorism label to all non-state actors it disagreed with or considered a threat to its own power.¹³¹ Whatever the label, there was no doubt that Saudi Arabia saw the MB and various affiliates across the region as drivers of instability. Even if it did not assess the Brotherhood to have been the instigator of the Arab Uprisings, it certainly saw it as eager to take advantage of any resulting political openings. Ultimately, it regarded the group as one of the main agitators for revolutionary, and therefore destabilising, political change in the region throughout the 2010s, particularly in Egypt.¹³² Riyadh considered the establishment of a MB-led government in Cairo as potentially problematic on multiple levels. It worried that, if successful, this could pose a challenge to the Kingdom's own model of religiously legitimised political rule. But it also feared that the MB's failure to govern Egypt effectively could permanently destabilise the Arab world's most populous nation. Finally, and importantly, it perceived the government of President Morsi as undermining the resolve of Arab states to confront Iran by directly engaging with Tehran.¹³³ Yet, it is also important to note that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour during the 2010s also showed that it retained a degree of flexibility in its willingness to tolerate or even work with affiliates of the MB (and parties sharing a similar interpretation of political Islam) in Yemen, Tunisia and elsewhere.¹³⁴

6. 2. 4. Qatar and Turkey

Saudi Arabia's perception of Qatar and Turkey as drivers of instability in the MENA was closely tied to what Riyadh viewed as their' support for revolutionary change across the region, and their promotion of political groups tied to the

¹³⁰ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME."

¹³¹ Saudi Journalist, interview with author. See also: Stephanie Nebehay, "Saudi Arabia Crushing Dissent through Counter-Terrorism Law: Investigator, *Reuters*, 7 June 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-rights-un/saudi-arabia-crushing-dissent-through-counter-terrorism-law-investigator-idUSKCN1J31RA>. [accessed 19 May 2020].

¹³² T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote," (22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference); Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech, HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal." (speech, 12th Middle East Conference, London Business School, London, 30 May 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJrcWxE7VRU> [accessed 18 May 2020]

¹³³ Discussed in interviews with: Emile Hokayem (Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies), interview with author, 27 March 2019; Jenkins, interview with author; UK-based Academic (B), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019.

¹³⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Former US Defence Official, interview with author, 15 October 2019; Jenkins, interview with author; Christopher Phillips (Reader, Queen Mary, University of London), interview with author, 26 March 2019; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (B), interview with author.

MB.¹³⁵ As noted in the summary of Saudi Arabia's big-picture narrative, the Kingdom also held Doha and Ankara responsible for undermining any semblance of regional unity, particularly vis-a-vis Iran, and turning regional organisations such as the GCC, Arab League and OIC from fora through which Riyadh could project its influence into theatres of discord and competition.¹³⁶

In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, the Saudi government saw Qatar turn from what it had long regarded as an irritant,¹³⁷ into an aspiring regional power breaking with the consensus within the GCC, of which Saudi Arabia had always considered itself the ultimate arbiter.¹³⁸ It saw Qatar foment instability across the region by supporting and hosting political groups it disagreed with; and by using *Al-Jazeera* and other media outlets to give them a public platform and carry coverage critical of the Saudi monarchy and governments it considered vital partners (e.g. the Bahraini monarchy and the Al-Sisi government in Egypt).¹³⁹ With this behaviour and its functional relations to Iran, Qatar was not just undermining the unity of what Riyadh considered the Saudi-led Arab world, but — more egregiously — was also damaging the unity and national security of the Gulf monarchies.¹⁴⁰ One analyst interviewed for this thesis summed up the sense of betrayal felt by Saudi Arabia: “The Saudis were constantly looking out their front window for impending doom and then Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (Qatar’s Emir until 2013) unlocked the backdoor.”¹⁴¹

Meanwhile, Turkey's regional policies were, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, not just aligning with the destabilising activities of Qatar, but also represented a challenge at the level of regional leadership. Not unlike Iran, it regarded

¹³⁵ T. F. Al-Saud, “Full Interview.” Also discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; UK-based Saudi Political Analyst, interview with author.

¹³⁶ Discussed in interviews with: French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; Saudi Academic, interview with author.

¹³⁷ See for example: Mohammed Al-Yahya, “The Rift with Qatar as Seen in Riyadh,” *Atlantic Council*, 13 June 2017, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-rift-with-qatar-as-seen-in-riyadh/>. [accessed 20 May 2020]; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020). Also discussed in interview with: Rory Miller (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 12 April 2018.

¹³⁸ Discussed in interviews with: French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Gerd Nonneman (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 17 April 2018; Stephens, interview with author. See also: Saud Al-Tamamy, “Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security,” in *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, ed. Henner Fuertig (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 191-208; Abdulla Baabood, “The Future of the GCC Amid the Gulf Divide,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 161-78.

¹³⁹ Al-Jubeir, “In Conversation with HE Adel Al-Jubeir”; K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests.” Also discussed in interview with: Althari, interview with author.

¹⁴⁰ Former Senior British Diplomat, interview with author.

¹⁴¹ Stephens, interview with author.

President Erdogan as seeking to establish undue Turkish influence in Arab states across the region, and staking a claim to an Islamically-legitimised regional leadership position, based on the legacy of the Ottoman caliphs and via the promotion of his own model of electorally-legitimised political Islam closely related that of the MB.¹⁴²

6. 2. 5. International (In)Action

Beyond these regional factors, Saudi Arabia perceived instability in the MENA as driven by the actions — and lack thereof — of global powers. Saudi leaders and officials frequently highlighted the long history of external interference and global power competition in the MENA.¹⁴³ For example, Mohammed bin Salman described the US invasion of Iraq, but also the US withdrawal from the country in 2011, as the “biggest mistakes that created other things today in the Middle East;”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia regarded the competing geopolitical interest of global powers as repeatedly paralysing institutions like the UN Security Council and therefore preventing international action to resolve conflicts in the MENA, such as the war in Syria, and thereby fuelling instability in the region.¹⁴⁵

In this context of long-standing international drivers of instability in the Middle East, the Saudi government also frequently pointed to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the unresolved question of Palestinian statehood as an important factor. It described it as a persistent example of unjust external interference in the Middle East — in form of western support for Israel — and, closely related, evidence of the international system’s inability and/or unwillingness to resolve conflicts in the region.¹⁴⁶ It further regarded the continuing suffering of the Palestinian people as an injustice at the centre of the Arab world that was easily manipulated by malign forces like Iran and extremist groups seeking to attract popular support in the region.¹⁴⁷ Amongst the analysts and former western diplomats with experience of working in Saudi Arabia interviewed for this thesis, there was consensus that the Palestinian cause continued to resonate for

¹⁴² Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Diplomat, interview with author; French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Gause, interview with author; Gulf-based Political Analyst, email interview with author, 21 April 2019; UK-based Saudi Political Analyst, email interview with the author, 17 April 2019.

¹⁴³ T. F. Al-Saud, “The Middle East and Its Future Directions.”

¹⁴⁴ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

¹⁴⁵ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech, HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal.” Also discussed in interview with: William Patey (Former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 15 April 2019.

¹⁴⁶ T. F. Al-Saud, “Failed Favouritism toward Israel”; T. F. Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Doctrine.”

¹⁴⁷ M. b. N. Al-Saud, “This Plague”; T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote,” (26th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

senior Saudi decision-makers, particularly those from an older generation, and remained an issue the Kingdom felt it could not abandon. While Riyadh supported the Abraham Accords, it was not willing to — or felt unable to — normalise relations with Israel itself. However, the interviewees also agreed in their assessment that Saudi Arabia primarily viewed the question of Palestinian statehood as a legacy issue that needed to be resolved in order to deprive Iran and other extremists of a lightning rod for their even more destabilising activities in the region.¹⁴⁸ This chimed with Khalid bin Bandar's characterisation of the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict as "like the thorn in the lion's foot"¹⁴⁹ that served to distract from more pressing matters.

6. 2. 6. US Retrenchment

Ultimately, however, Saudi Arabia perceived the USA's approach towards the region as the most significant international factor in enabling and driving regional instability during the 2010s. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the USA was supposed to be the Kingdom's closest partner in all matters related to regional order and security, based on a decades-long, mutually beneficial relationship. What it saw, however, was a US policy, particularly under the Obama administration, that was not only unhelpful in protecting Saudi interests, but was actively undermining them. This had started with the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in 2003,¹⁵⁰ but accelerated with the Obama presidency and the advent of the Arab Uprisings. For example, Saudi Arabia saw the Obama administration's unwillingness to intervene decisively in the war in Syria as a key factor in allowing the paralysation of the UN Security Council and allowing for the conflict's continued escalation, which, in turn, drove instability across the region.¹⁵¹ Saudi Arabia not just perceived the USA as reneging on its commitments to regional order, but also saw many of its actions as actively dismantling some of its key pillars and thereby undermining the Kingdom's security. This included asking Egypt's Mubarak, a long-time Saudi

¹⁴⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Black, interview with author; Chris Doyle (Director, Center for Arab British Understanding), interview with author, 29 March 2019; Former British Diplomat, interview with author; Jane Kinninmont (Head of Programmes, The Elders), interview with author, 4 April 2019; Patey, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Political/Economic Analyst, interview with author, 19 February 2019.

¹⁴⁹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁵⁰ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME." Also discussed in interview with: Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁵¹ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Diplomat, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author.

and US partner, to step down and tolerating the ascent of the MB; not standing by the Al-Khalifa in Bahrain even though they had hosted the US Navy for decades; and not intervening decisively to unseat the Syrian government.

Most importantly, the Obama administration's direct engagement with Iran and concession that Tehran had legitimate interests in the region was anathema to Saudi Arabia. Within the context of what Saudi Arabia perceived as its zero-sum regional struggle with Iran, this meant that the USA was not just tolerating Tehran's regional expansionism, but simultaneously also directly undermining Saudi Arabia's national security and regional interests.¹⁵² At the end of the 2010s, the Saudi narrative about the Trump presidency remained generally positive. But it is noticeable that the public criticism of President Obama and his regional policies, at least by the Kingdom's most senior leadership, became significantly harsher only after his departure from the Whitehouse. In 2016, Mohammed bin Salman had still described the "work between us and the United States" as "very strong and very magnificent."¹⁵³ Two years later, he declared that US policy in the region "under the leadership of President Obama failed."¹⁵⁴ It is clear that Saudi Arabia appreciated Trump's strong anti-Iran stance and welcomed increased US military deployments to the Gulf region. Yet, the fact that Washington did not take significant action against Iran after the attacks on Saudi oil installations in September 2019 deeply unsettled the Saudi leadership.¹⁵⁵

In general, Saudi Arabia experienced the US policy in the Middle East during the 2010s — under Obama and Trump — as inconsistent and unreliable, and driven by a desire to significantly reduce American investment in maintaining the regional order.¹⁵⁶

6. 3. Self-Perception: Saudi Arabia's Role in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia had long presented itself as "the bulwark of the Middle East,"¹⁵⁷ the steadfast and moderate last line of defence against an array of extremist

¹⁵² Discussed in interviews with: Former US Defence Official, interview with author; Kinnimont, interview with author; Phillips, interview with author.

¹⁵³ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Transcript: Interview with Muhammad Bin Salman."

¹⁵⁴ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests."

¹⁵⁵ US Academic, interview with author.

¹⁵⁶ Former US Defence Official, interview with author; Hertog, interview with author.

¹⁵⁷ T. F. Al-Saud, "Failed Favouritism toward Israel."

“evil forces”¹⁵⁸ in a historically “conflict-cursed region.”¹⁵⁹ During the 2010s, as it saw the region around it descend into unprecedented instability the Kingdom had no choice but “to strengthen and clarify its own foreign policy,”¹⁶⁰ according to Turki Al-Faisal. As noted above, while much of this narrative of Saudi Arabia as the region’s necessarily assertive leader remained constant throughout the decade, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis after the 2015 succession and the ascent of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which sought to portray the Kingdom not just as the defender of the regional status quo, but also as “a beacon” that could show the rest of the region “where we can go.”¹⁶¹

Saudi leaders and officials consistently described their own country as a haven of stability in the region, not least thanks to a close bond between the government and its people. According to Khalid bin Bandar, the Kingdom was in the fortunate position whereby its people’s demands for change were “not quite as potent” as elsewhere in the region, but were also “being matched from the top as well,” allowing population and government to develop their country “in unison.”¹⁶² This characterisation omitted the fact that the Saudi state did not tolerate serious dissent,¹⁶³ and left out the government’s significant struggles to diversify its economy. At the end of the 2010s, Vision 2030 had brought significant social change, but had not delivered the economic transformation required to accommodate a rapidly growing young and well-educated workforce.¹⁶⁴ Politically, King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman centralised power in what could at least partially be seen as an effort to eliminate any potential challenge to their rule from within the royal family.¹⁶⁵ Yet, while the Saudi leadership may not have been quite as sanguine about their

¹⁵⁸ Al-Jubeir, “What’s Next.”

¹⁵⁹ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech”; he used the same expression in 2016: T. F. Al-Saud, “Emerging Realities.”

¹⁶⁰ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote,” (24th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

¹⁶¹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Gause, “Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges”; Karen Smith-Diwan, “The Big Gamble of Mohammed Bin Salman – and Saudi Arabia,” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 23 March 2020, available at: <https://agsiw.org/the-big-gamble-of-mohammed-bin-salman-and-saudi-arabia/>. [accessed 15 May 2020]; Guido Steinberg, “Anführer der Gegenrevolution: Saudi Arabien und der Arabische Frühling,” (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2014).

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Grand and Katherine Wolff, *Assessing Saudi Vision 2030: A 2020 Review* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2020).

¹⁶⁵ Discussed in interviews with: French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Koch, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), interview with author. See also: Haddi Fathallah, “Failure of Regional Governance in Saudi Arabia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 July 2018, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76928>.; Gause, “Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges”; Neil Partrick, “Saudi Foreign Policy: A New Regional Approach or More of the Same?” *Saudi Arabia: Domestic, Regional and International Challenges* (Singapore, 2017).

country's domestic stability as outwardly displayed, it likely remained relatively assured of the durability of its domestic political system, taking confidence from the Kingdom's long history of continuity even when faced with crises and predictions of imminent collapse.¹⁶⁶

6. 3. 1. The Default Regional Leader

As for its role in the MENA, Saudi Arabia had always perceived itself as a default regional leader, a notion heightened in the 21st century as other traditional heavyweights — Egypt, Iraq and Syria — were occupied with internal problems. Within the Arab world, Saudi Arabia saw itself as one of the “most significant political powers,”¹⁶⁷ owing to its economic prowess — “we are the only Arab G20 nation”¹⁶⁸ — and cultural status deriving from the fact that its borders encompassed most of the Arabian Peninsula, the “birthplace of the Arab nation.”¹⁶⁹ Both within the Arab world and beyond, Saudi Arabia understood itself as having a special responsibility, but also as deriving “tremendous soft power”¹⁷⁰ from, its position as the protector of Islam's holy cities Mecca and Medina. Saudi leaders and officials argued that this gave Saudi Arabia the ability to “symbolically unite most Muslims worldwide,”¹⁷¹ making the Kingdom “critically important to the world.”¹⁷² Finally, Saudi Arabia also saw itself as holding a central position in the global economy, due to its status as “the world's de facto central banker for energy.”¹⁷³ In sum, according to a Saudi diplomat, “we see ourselves as, and take the responsibility of, being the leader in the region;”¹⁷⁴ in fact, he continued, this “is not only how we understand our role in the region, it is the role that has been given to us.”¹⁷⁵

On this basis, Saudi Arabia's definition of its role in the MENA during the 2010s — and for most of its modern history, for that matter — was the product of

¹⁶⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Former US Defence Official, interview with author; Saudi Journalist, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁶⁷ Mohammed bin Nawaf Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia Will Go It Alone,” *The New York Times*, 17 December 2013, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-will-go-it-alone.html> [accessed 19 May 2020].

¹⁶⁸ Althari, interview with author.

¹⁶⁹ Saudi Academic, interview with author.

¹⁷⁰ Adel Al-Jubeir, “A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir at the Council on Foreign Relations,” interview by Richard Haass, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 September 2019, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-minister-adel-al-jubeir-saudi-arabia-0> [accessed 19 May 2020].

¹⁷¹ T. F. Al-Saud, “Failed Favouritism toward Israel.”

¹⁷² Al-Jubeir, “A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir at the Council on Foreign Relations.”

¹⁷³ M. b. N. Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia Will Go It Alone.”

¹⁷⁴ Althari, interview with author.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

overlapping, but also somewhat contradictory, factors. Saudi Arabia's self-perception as the centre of the Arab and Islamic world meant that it was inextricably tied to two identities that resonated far beyond its borders. Over the decades, both of these identities gave rise to revolutionary, transnational political projects, including Pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 60s, and the various interpretations of Pan-Islamism championed by groups like AQ, Daesh, the MB and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Due to its geographic location, status as the host of Islam's holiest sites, and enormous resource wealth, Saudi Arabia understood the takeover of its own territory as the logical ultimate objective of all these movements.¹⁷⁶ In the words of Khalid bin Bandar: "we have two of the most desired things in the world: the holy cities of Islam and oil."¹⁷⁷ Politically, Saudi Arabia therefore consistently stressed its commitment to concepts such as statehood and national sovereignty and insisted that these should be the foundation of any regional order.¹⁷⁸ This was often traced back — by Saudis and external observers alike — to the legacy of Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, the Kingdom's modern founder, who opted to establish a modern state with fixed borders and even resorted to using force against some of his own troops who wanted him to build a new Arab-Islamic empire.¹⁷⁹ Yet, in addition to emphasising the importance of international sovereignty norms, the Kingdom's leaders used their country's special status in the Arab and Islamic worlds — and its wealth — to influence how both the Arab and Islamic identities were interpreted, both in the region and beyond. They may have done so out of a sense of responsibility, but certainly also in an attempt to prevent Arab and/or Islamic transnational political projects from taking hold and growing into challenges to its sovereignty. In this context, Saudi Arabia embraced the notion of itself as "a status quo power"¹⁸⁰ as it pertained to upholding the Middle East's modern state system and worked to have at least a degree of influence over

¹⁷⁶ Discussed in interviews with: T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech"; Patey, interview with author; Neil Quilliam (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 26 February 2019; Shihabi, interview with author.

¹⁷⁷ K. b. B. Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH."

¹⁷⁸ Adel Al-Jubeir, "Address by His Excellency, Mr Adel Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Minister for Foreign Affairs," (speech, General Debate of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 1 October 2015), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/70/saudi-arabia> [accessed 17 May 2020]; Mohammed bin Nayef Al-Saud, "Statement by His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior," (speech, General Debate of the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 21 September 2016), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/71/saudi-arabia> [accessed 17 May 2020].

¹⁷⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Jenkins, interview with author; Shihabi, interview with author.

¹⁸⁰ Shihabi, interview with author.

inter-Arab politics;¹⁸¹ and it sought to influence the interpretation of Islam around the world through a sprawling network of often very conservative religious institutions and charities, not all of which the government in Riyadh was able to completely control.¹⁸²

Saudi Arabia itself claimed that “we are not a hegemonic player.”¹⁸³ According to Khalid bin Bandar: “in fact, the opposite, we want people to leave us alone.”¹⁸⁴ In the first instance, this seems difficult to reconcile with the Kingdom’s claim to regional leadership and record of exercising influence and power. Yet, the assertion’s sentiment becomes more comprehensible when analysed in the context of how Saudi Arabia interpreted its leadership role in the region, and in comparison to how it perceived other actors — most notably Iran — to be pursuing revisionist objectives in the region. Saudi Arabia “has always seen itself as the centre of gravity”¹⁸⁵ in the MENA, rather than as an activist leader. For most of its history, it did this “by encouraging others, and funding others, to defend the outer perimeter in the region;”¹⁸⁶ it worked closely with the USA and used mostly behind-the-scenes diplomacy and the generous distribution of money to other governments in the region — often referred to as *Riyalpolitik*¹⁸⁷ — to secure and maintain the existing regional system, at least in the Arab world.¹⁸⁸ According to Khalid bin Bandar, “there isn’t a single country in the whole region that hasn’t at some stage benefited from Saudi aid.”¹⁸⁹ During the 2010s, and particularly in the second half of the decade, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy became “expeditionary”¹⁹⁰ (e.g. intervening in Bahrain in 2011 and in Yemen since 2015). Saudi Arabia felt that it had “to bring stability to the region,

¹⁸¹ For historical accounts see: Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). For more contemporary works see: Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the MENA* (New York, Public Affairs, 2016); Michael Stephens, “The Arab Cold War Redux,” in *Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism*, ed. Thanassis Cambanis (New York: The Century Foundation, 2017).

¹⁸² David Commins, *The Mission and the Kingdom: Wahhabi Power Behind the Saudi Throne* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Menno Preuschaft, “Islam and Identity in Foreign Policy,” in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 16-29.

¹⁸³ K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH.”

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Jenkins, interview with author.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ The term has long been used in the literature about Saudi foreign policy, see for example: Bahgat Korany and Moataz A. Fattah, “Irreconcilable Role-Partners? Saudi Foreign Policy between the Ulama and the US,” in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds. Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 343-96.

¹⁸⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Kinninmont, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author, 27 February 2019.

¹⁸⁹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁹⁰ Jenkins, interview with author.

because it is the only way we can be left alone.”¹⁹¹ Yet, its primary objective remained to prevent or reverse political changes that it perceived as threatening. Even where Saudi Arabia pursued revisionist policies — for example, supporting the Syrian opposition, isolating Qatar, and putting pressure on Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri to resign — it arguably sought to remove threats to what it regarded as the *status quo* regional state system: It wanted to reduce Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon, and pressure Qatar into ending its regional policy, which Saudi Arabia perceived to be destabilising.¹⁹² Ultimately, the claim that Saudi Arabia did not consider itself a “hegemonic player”¹⁹³ may be a narrative ploy. But it can also be understood as an expression of the Kingdom’s perception of its regional position and role as primarily defensive, occupied with maintaining a regional state system that it saw as essential for its security, but under threat from other regional powers with hegemonic ambitions.

6. 3. 2. Succession: Change and Continuity

In general, there was a lot of continuity throughout the decade, both in terms of how Saudi Arabia perceived the strategic environment in the MENA, and in how it understood its position and interests in the region.¹⁹⁴ However, there were also clear changes in how the new leadership approached foreign policy, manifested in a difference in style and a more assertive and explicit claim to regional leadership.

Under King Abdullah’s leadership, Saudi foreign policy was mostly conducted within long-established structures (as outlined in the literature review in Chapter 5). It was characterised by a deliberative decision-making process involving several powerful princes and other constituencies, such as the clerical establishment. As one former Saudi diplomat put it, the first instinct was “that we would take a step back; King Abdullah was very good at building consensus, making sure the religious right was at the table, the older generation, the younger generation.”¹⁹⁵ Saudi Arabia took assertive action in the region under

¹⁹¹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH.”

¹⁹² French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Gulf-based Political Analyst, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁹³ K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH.”

¹⁹⁴ Discussed in interview with: Former British Intelligence Officer, interview with author; Former Senior British Diplomat, interview with author; French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Gause, interview with author; Jenkins, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

¹⁹⁵ Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author.

King Abdullah — including by leading the intervention in Bahrain and the GCC initiative in Yemen in 2011, backing the overthrow of the MB-led government in Egypt and taking control of the Arab response to the conflict in Syria in 2013, and trying to pressure Qatar into adopting regional policies more in line with those of the rest of the GCC in 2014¹⁹⁶ — but it was generally couched in rhetoric that described the Kingdom as seeking consensus-based solutions to defend the region from collapse.¹⁹⁷

The new leadership around King Salman and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman adopted a more unapologetically confident approach to regional leadership. It centralised decision-making and replaced the preference for consensus-building with an emphasis on decisiveness.¹⁹⁸ One observer of Saudi politics said that “the new thing since the shift in the regime is *Hazam*, decisiveness — everything is about decisiveness.”¹⁹⁹ The same Saudi diplomat cited in the previous paragraph summed up the new approach as follows: “we are not going to hesitate so we can be seen as strong.”²⁰⁰

The new leadership intensified the promotion of a distinctly Saudi national identity, and placed the country’s youthful population at the centre of their proclaimed Vision 2030.²⁰¹ It also disempowered the conservative religious establishment and sought to position the Kingdom as a champion of so-called moderate Islam. This can be seen as an attempt to retain religion as a source of political legitimacy, while reducing its constraints on policy decisions and making Saudi Arabia less of a target for accusations that its interpretation of Islam is fuelling radicalism.²⁰² In terms of foreign policy, Saudi Arabia doubled down on the turn to a more assertive posture overseen by King Abdullah, and further increased its readiness to deploy coercive power — including by launching the intervention in Yemen and standing up multilateral initiatives such

¹⁹⁶ The literature review in Chapter 5 includes references to detailed accounts of these actions by Saudi Arabia.

¹⁹⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Kinninmont, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

¹⁹⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Former British Intelligence Officer, interview with author; French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Fürtig, interview with author; Gause, interview with author; Saudi Journalist, interview with author.

¹⁹⁹ US-based Gulf Analyst (B), interview with author.

²⁰⁰ Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author.

²⁰¹ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia’s Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes”; M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.” Also discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Althari, interview with author.

²⁰² Eman Alhoussein, “Saudi Arabia Champions ‘Moderate Islam,’ Underpinning Reform Efforts,” *Issue Paper 10* (Washington DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2020).

as the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, that were less occupied with building regional consensus first. It also exerted significant political and economic pressure on fellow Arab governments, most notably those in Doha and Beirut, to fall in line with its regional agenda.²⁰³ In Riyadh's assessment, diplomacy and Riyalpolitik were not working while the regional system was so dangerously destabilised by the various factors outlined above. Saudi Arabia had grown "sick and tired of the region being a disaster"²⁰⁴ and therefore could no longer wait for others in the MENA and beyond to join it in dealing with the region's crises.

Ultimately, Saudi Arabia's self-perception during the 2010s was shaped by the Kingdom's long-established position as a natural regional power founded on its inherently special status with regard to both the Arab and Islamic dimensions of MENA geopolitics. Yet, it was also influenced by the rapidly evolving dynamics of the regional environment, and the change in personalities amongst its most senior leaders. In some instances, this revealed itself in apparent contradictions that suggested that Saudi Arabia was still coming to terms with these changes. For example, Saudi leaders and officials often emphasised Saudi Arabia's long history as a regional power,²⁰⁵ but also rejected criticism and urged patience when accused of getting things wrong, particularly with regards to its intervention in Yemen. According to Khalid bin Bandar, Saudi Arabia was "learning on the go," and "you don't suddenly become a wise old man, you have to have experiences and failures."²⁰⁶ Similarly, Saudi representatives emphasised the Kingdom's desire to be "be left alone,"²⁰⁷ to insulate itself "from the problems that we are facing in the region,"²⁰⁸ in order to concentrate on its domestic reform process. Yet, they also professed Saudi Arabia's ambition to be "the economic dynamo of the region"²⁰⁹ and to set "an example for the Arab and Islamic world."²¹⁰

²⁰³ The literature review in Chapter 5 includes references to detailed accounts of these actions by Saudi Arabia.

²⁰⁴ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

²⁰⁵ Adel Al-Jubeir, "Address by His Excellency, Mr Adel Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Minister for Foreign Affairs," (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 23 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/saudi-arabia> [accessed 18 May 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech."

²⁰⁶ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Adel Al-Jubeir "Press Conference," (speech, Tokyo, 2 September 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bcfNpc8utQ> [accessed 19 May 2020].

²⁰⁹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH."

²¹⁰ Al-Jubeir, "Finding a New Equilibrium."

6. 4. Conclusion

The 2010s were an extraordinary decade for Saudi Arabia. Although it had been used to dealing with a fragile and conflict-prone regional environment, it was taken by surprise by the Arab Uprisings and the region-wide turmoil that followed. Over the decade, Saudi Arabia saw the MENA's regional order collapse around it, bringing endemic instability and insecurity ever closer to its borders and core regional and national security interests. It saw fellow Arab governments — some partners, others foes — unable or unwilling to satisfy their populations' socio-economic needs and overwhelmed popular unrest. From its perspective, the Arab Uprisings' misguided revolutionary fervour unleashed an array of malign forces ready to foment, deepen and exploit the resulting instability, eager to hijack flailing Arab states and, ultimately, dismantle the region's state system. Saudi Arabia saw the MB and its affiliates, and AQ and Daesh as important drivers of regional instability, but it assigned most of the blame to Iran, which it regarded as pursuing a revisionist campaign for hegemony over the Arab world. Indeed, there was a tendency by Saudi leaders and officials to hold Iran responsible for almost everything that went wrong in the region — in the words of Mohammed bin Salman: “if you see any problem in the Middle East, you will find Iran. Iraq? Iran's there. Yemen? Iran is there. Syria? Iran is there. Lebanon? Iran's there.”²¹¹ In Riyadh's view, the increasingly dire situation in the MENA was enabled and made worse by what it perceived as Qatar and Turkey's reckless and selfish regional policies and — most of all — the irresponsible behaviour of successive US governments. Washington had not just allowed a strategic vacuum to emerge that Iran and other “evil forces”²¹² could fill, but, at least under President Obama, had also actively favoured engagement with Tehran at the expense of its traditional partners in the region.

In this environment, Saudi Arabia felt that it had no choice but to adopt a more assertive foreign policy, employing not just its diplomatic, economic and cultural weight, but also increasingly resorting to coercive actions. The Kingdom understood itself as the region's natural centre of gravity and the only leading Arab power left standing. Abandoned and undermined by its supposed partners, it considered itself responsible to lead the Arab defence of the region's status

²¹¹ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

²¹² Al-Jubeir, “What's Next.”

quo state system. During the second half of the decade, the new Saudi leadership, dominated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, led an at least partial reinterpretation of Saudi Arabia's role in the region. Not content with the notion of Saudi Arabia as Arab the world's last line of defence and steadfast "the bulwark of the Middle East,"²¹³ they sought to portray the Kingdom as "a beacon in the region" determined "to bring stability to the region, because it is the only way we can be left alone."²¹⁴ What this stability looked like, in Saudi Arabia's conception, is the subject of the next chapter.

²¹³ T. F. Al-Saud, "Failed Favouritism toward Israel."

²¹⁴ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

7. Saudi Arabia's Conception of Stability

Rectifying Imbalance

Stability in the MENA has “always been a priority and the basic determinant”¹ of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, according to Turki Al-Faisal. Throughout the 2010s, Saudi leaders tirelessly emphasised their concern for the region’s “security and stability.”² Even its military intervention in Yemen was, in the words of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, “focused on [...] bringing stability.”³ Indeed, as the MENA’s self-declared “base of stability,”⁴ the Kingdom was determined to “also be that beacon of stability”⁵ and standard-bearer of a “vision of light”⁶ for the rest of the region. As Saudi Arabia saw the region around it come undone following the Arab Uprisings, it declared that “we have got to bring stability to the region”⁷ to protect its own national security and foster an environment conducive to its regional interests and domestic development agenda.

The analysis of Saudi Arabia’s perception of the strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s in the previous chapter outlines how the Kingdom saw the region descend into unprecedented instability. It also details Saudi Arabia’s perception of itself as a natural regional leader whose security was tied to the maintenance of a regional order in which hostile and revisionist forces were held at bay. Building on this, the present chapter analyses Saudi Arabia’s conception of stability in the MENA — i.e. the region as Saudi Arabia wanted to see it. The chapter does not suggest that the Kingdom had a holistic or detailed

¹ Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech by Turki Al-Faisal” (speech, 3rd Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, Berlin, 26 November 2013), available at: <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/mediathek/keynote-speech-by-prince-turki-al-faisal-at-the-3rd-berlin-foreign-policy-forum-656> [accessed 12 October 2020].

² See for example: Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Speech of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” (speech, 24th Arab Summit, Doha, 30 March 2013), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/ArabLeague/Pages/ArticleID2013327151518658.aspx> [accessed 14 May 2020]; Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Speech of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” (speech, 15th GCC Consultative Meeting, Riyadh, 5 June 2015), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/ArabLeague/Pages/ArticleID2013327151518658.aspx> [accessed 17 May 2020].

³ Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good',” interview by Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/> [accessed 18 April 2019].

⁴ Former Saudi Diplomat, phone interview with author, 28 April 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Finding a New Equilibrium in the Middle East,” (speech, World Economic Forum, Davos, 24 January 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI7QIAV0qsA> [accessed 14 May 2020].

⁷ Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud (Saudi Ambassador to the UK), interview with author, 11 December 2019.

vision of stability in the region; most observers of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy interviewed for this thesis agreed that this most likely did not exist. Nevertheless, building on Saudi Arabia's perception of the regional environment, and applying the thesis' analytical framework, it is possible to identify a number of key elements that characterised the Saudi leadership's thoughts about the kinds of systems of order it viewed as conducive to stability and therefore favourable to its security and interests during the period under examination in this thesis.

The chapter argues in the decade following the Arab Uprisings, Saudi Arabia saw stability in the MENA as based on strong Arab states capable of controlling their territory and warding off external influence, particularly from Iran and Turkey. It wanted to see Arab governments that were unlikely to change dramatically, did not champion transnational political projects, and pursued foreign policies that, if not directly aligned with, at least did not contradict the Kingdom's regional agenda. To be conducive to stability, the regional order needed to protect and maintain the region's status quo state system, with no other state — especially not the non-Arab states Iran and Turkey — attempting to, or being allowed to, achieve hegemony or more influence over individual Arab states than Saudi Arabia had itself. Finally, for Saudi Arabia, stability in the MENA needed to be enabled by an engaged international community, most importantly an attentive USA, that recognised Saudi Arabia as the primary representative of at least the Arab portion of the region.

7. 1. The Role of External Powers

External powers, most of all the USA, but also Russia, China and European countries played a key role in Saudi Arabia's conception of stability in the MENA. It regarded them as important economic and security partners, both for itself and for the region, and as vital enablers of regional stability — if they behaved in a certain way.

As noted in the preceding chapter, Saudi leaders and officials have often highlighted the involvement of external powers in the MENA as a source of

instability.⁸ Yet, throughout its modern history, Saudi Arabia has also regarded its bilateral relationships with countries outside the region, and with the USA in particular, as critical to its national security.⁹ Moreover, as much as it may have regarded the region's state system as a product of the colonial era, the Kingdom also considered the maintenance of this system as essential for regional stability. During the Cold War, although officially non-aligned, Saudi Arabia very clearly sided with the Western Bloc and saw the Soviet Union's involvement in the region as a source of instability.¹⁰ In the 21st century, however, it was building increasingly close relationships with Russia and China.¹¹

Saudi Arabia acknowledged that external powers had "their own interests"¹² — related to security, economics or geopolitics — in the MENA, "whether we like it or not."¹³ In fact, it actively wanted external powers to engage in the region, particularly at times of profound regional instability. As Turki Al-Faisal put it: "no threat is more dangerous [...] than the absence and lack of world leadership in international and regional security and stability."¹⁴ In this context, Saudi Arabia has consistently appealed to the strategic interests of external powers and positioned itself as a valuable partner in their pursuit, including by working to maintain a modicum of oil price stability as the world's swing-producer,¹⁵ and by cooperating on matters such as counter-terrorism.¹⁶ But it has also insisted that

⁸ Saud Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal Speech," (speech, Second Consultive Meeting of The Gulf Cooperation Council, Manama, 7 January 2013), available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/dataAndstatements/Letters/Committees/Pages/ArticleID20137113382757.aspx> [accessed 15 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "The Middle East and its Future Directions," (speech, American University of Cairo, Cairo, 12 May 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvJadUdHW1w> [accessed 13 May 2020]; Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME About the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's Plans and President Trump," interview by Time Editorial Team, *Time*, 5 April 2018, available at: <http://time.com/5228006/mohammed-bin-salman-interview-transcript-full/> [accessed 13 May 2020].

⁹ Gregory Gause, "The Foreign Policy of Saud Arabia," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 185-206.

¹⁰ Toby Matthiesen, "Saudi Arabia and the Cold War," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & CO, 2018), 217-33

¹¹ Jonathan Fulton and Li-Chen Sim, eds. *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2018); Jean-Loup Samaan, *Strategic Hedging in the Arabian Peninsula*, Whitehall Paper 92, (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2018).

¹² Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "International Interests in Middle East Security and Non-Proliferation," (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 8 December 2013), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2013-4e92/plenary-5-fbc6/turki-al-faisal-7a7c> [2 June 2020].

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech."

¹⁵ Neil Quilliam, "Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Oil," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 30-51.

¹⁶ Daniel Byman, "The U.S.-Saudi Arabia Counterterrorism Relationship," *Brookings*, 24 May 2016, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/> [accessed 19 May 2020].

external powers, particularly those with roles on the UN Security Council, had a responsibility for maintaining peace and security in the region.¹⁷ For example, according to Al-Jubeir, “the world has a responsibility to ensure the freedom of navigation in the Gulf,”¹⁸ which Saudi Arabia considered threatened by Iran. With regards to Saudi Arabia’s conception of stability in the MENA, the question was therefore not if, but how external powers should be involved in the region.

7. 1. 1. The Rules-Based International System

In general, Saudi Arabia saw the rules-based international system, or at least its most basic tenets of state sovereignty, non-interference and territorial integrity, as a useful framework for stability in the MENA. Its leaders frequently highlighted that the Kingdom was “a founding member”¹⁹ of the UN, and over the decades Saudi Arabia has become comfortable with the organisation’s structure and mechanisms. It has established good relations with all five permanent Security Council members; and become adept at navigating the various parts of the organisation, including, for example, to shield itself and its allies in the region from the most significant criticism on human rights matters.²⁰ Furthermore, as the only Arab member of the G20 (not a UN body, but a part of the international system), it felt affirmed in its desired status as the leading representative of the Arab world on the international stage.²¹ From Saudi Arabia’s perspective, the consistent application of the sovereignty and non-interference norms enshrined in the UN Charter, would have gone a long way towards addressing what it perceived as the most important source of instability

¹⁷ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Address by His Excellency, Mr Adel Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Minister for Foreign Affairs,” (speech, General Debate of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 1 October 2015), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/70/saudi-arabia> [accessed 17 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Geopolitics: Ideology and Fragmentation in the Middle East,” (speech, Margaret Thatcher Conference on Security, London, 27 June 2017), available at: <http://www.cps.org.uk/security2017/> [accessed 2 June 2020].

¹⁸ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Interview,” interview by Hadley Gamble, *CNBC*, 21 September 2019, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BetbpJ3ZBXE> [accessed 2 June 2020].

¹⁹ Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Saud, “Speech of His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, Head of the Delegation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” (speech, General Debate of the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 28 September 2012), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/67/saudi-arabia> [accessed 12 May 2020]; Al-Jubeir, “Address by His Excellency, Mr Adel Ahmed Al-Jubeir.”

²⁰ See for example the discussion surrounding Saudi Arabia’s selection to the UN Human Rights Council: Al-Arabiya, “Saudi Arabia Wins U.N. Human Rights Council Seat,” 12 November 2013, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/11/12/Saudi-Arabia-wins-Human-Rights-Council-seat>. [accessed 3 June 2020]; Joyce Bukuru, “How Saudi Arabia Kept Its Un Human Rights Council Seat,” *Human Rights Watch*, 1 November 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/01/how-saudi-arabia-kept-its-un-human-rights-council-seat>. [accessed 3 June 2020].

²¹ Discussed in interviews with: Nawaf Althari (Senior Advisor to the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United Kingdom), interview with author, 6 December 2019; Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author. See also: M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

in the region, namely the undue interference in Arab states by Iran and Turkey.²² That said, Saudi Arabia made it very clear that it considered the international system to have failed in dealing with the instability and conflicts in the MENA, historically and especially during the 2010s. As an expression of this, Saudi Arabia refused to take up a temporary seat on the UN Security Council in 2013 and called for an overhaul of international decision-making mechanisms.²³ Ultimately, however, it has concluded that the problem lay not with the international system as such, but in the attitudes and behaviours of the main international powers, especially the USA and the other permanent members of the UN Security Council. (It also regarded other countries, such as India, Japan or Germany, as important partners, particularly economically, but not necessarily for maintaining regional stability.)

7. 1. 2. The USA

Saudi Arabia saw US commitment to regional security, and the Kingdom's national security, in particular, as "indispensable"²⁴ in its conception of stability in the MENA. In fact, as the previous chapter notes, the Kingdom's general complaints about the international community's lack of action in the region during the 2010s could be understood as referring primarily to the USA. According to Al-Jubeir, "if America is engaged in the region, the region is more secure; if America is disengaged in the region, the region becomes unstable."²⁵

In Saudi Arabia's ideal scenario, the USA would have acted as the Kingdom's unconditional security guarantor, "fight[ing] its wars for it,"²⁶ upholding the region's status quo state system, containing Iran and leading the military fight groups like AQ and Daesh, all while limiting its involvement in the internal affairs of Arab states — the Kingdom included — to issues aligned with Saudi Arabia's

²² Al-Jubeir, "Address by His Excellency, Mr Adel Ahmed Al-Jubeir"; Mohammed bin Nayef Al-Saud, "Statement by His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Nayef Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior," (speech, General Debate of the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 21 September 2016), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/71/saudi-arabia> [accessed 17 May 2020].

²³ Mohammed bin Nawaf Al-Saud, "Saudi Arabia Will Go it Alone," *The New York Times*, 17 December 2013, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-will-go-it-alone.html> [accessed 19 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal," (speech, 22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 22 October 2013), available at: <https://ncusar.org/programs/13-transcripts/2013-10-22-hrh-prince-turki-keynote.pdf> [accessed 16 May 2020].

²⁴ Adel Al-Jubeir, "In Conversation with HE Adel Al-Jubeir, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia," interview by Robin Niblett (Chatham House London Conference, London, 24 October 2017), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xw4AWD_7DI4 [accessed 15 May 2020].

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gregory Gause (Professor, Bush School of Government, Texas A+M University), phone interview with author, 17 June 2019.

own agenda (refraining from democracy promotion, for example).²⁷ In reality, Saudi Arabia was aware that the USA had never played such a perfect role — with the 1990/91 Gulf War representing a partial exception — and was unlikely to do so in the 21st century.²⁸ Based on the experiences of the 2010s, the Saudi government concluded that it needed to adjust to an environment in which the USA was less engaged in the MENA and expected regional powers to take responsibility for maintaining and/or building a regional security architecture. Riyadh hoped that the Obama presidency represented the nadir in US-Saudi relations and US policy in the region. It saw the Trump administration's hawkish stance on Iran and its more agnostic position towards Arab countries' domestic politics (including, Trump's readiness to move past the murder of Jamal Khashoggi despite bi-partisan outrage from the House and Senate) as more in line with its interests. But incidents such as the lack of a US response to the attack on Saudi oil installations in September 2019 (which both Riyadh and Washington attributed to Iran²⁹) and the US assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 (for which Riyadh received no advanced warning³⁰), reinforced Saudi Arabia's conviction that it would have to deal with a less-than-ideal level of US engagement in the region "under any US president"³¹ going forward. At the end of the 2010s, the Saudi government had come to terms with the notion that US interests in the region had decreased (due to increasing American energy independence, for example), along with the political will to devote as much attention to the region as in previous decades. Yet, it also hoped that Washington's remaining interests in the MENA — its relationship with Israel, its concerns about Iran and international terrorism, and geopolitical considerations vis-a-vis Russia and China — would be enough to keep it engaged for the foreseeable future.

²⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Gause, interview with author; Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 15 February 2019.

²⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Official, interview with author, 19 March 2019; Henner Fürtig (Director, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018; Christian Koch (Senior Advisor, The Bussola Institute), phone interview with author, 18 April 2019; Neil Partrick (Consultant and Writer), email interview with author, 22 March 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 27 March 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (C), phone interview with author, 31 May 2019.

²⁹ Roberta Rampton and Arshad Mohammed, "US Blames Iran for Saudi Oil Attack, Trump Says 'Locked and Loaded'," *Reuters*, 15 September 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks/u-s-blames-iran-for-saudi-oil-attack-trump-says-locked-and-loaded-idUSKBN1W00SA>. [accessed 3 June 2020].

³⁰ Arab News, "Saudi Arabia 'Not Consulted' over Soleimani Drone Strike," 5 January 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1608681/saudi-arabia>. [accessed 2 June 2020].

³¹ Partrick, interview with author.

On this basis, the USA still played a substantial role in Saudi Arabia's conception of stability. Saudi Arabia still wanted Washington to honour its responsibilities to international security that derived from its status as a global power — according to Mohammed bin Salman: “the United States must realise that they are the number one in the world and they have to act like it”³² — and stand by its established partners in the region, most obviously the Kingdom itself. In the words of Al-Jubeir, “if you don't want to lead, we'll lead and hope for your support;”³³ even more explicitly, Abdullah bin Faisal bin Turki Al-Saud, Ambassador in Washington from 2015-2017, stated in 2017: “In the end, it is American power, reinforcing and complementing the work of America's allies in the region, that will bring stability and lasting peace.”³⁴ At a minimum, this means that Saudi Arabia wanted the USA to use its economic and political power to constrain Iran; to help the Arab Gulf states militarily to deter Iranian threats to the security of the waters of the Gulf; and to continue to take direct military action against international terrorist groups like AQ and Daesh.³⁵ Further, it wanted Washington to provide the Kingdom and its allies in the region with political support and the necessary means — through arms sales and related technical support — to defend themselves and the region from, and ultimately roll back, what it considered to be the destabilising forces in the MENA, most of all Iran. In essence, Saudi Arabia wanted the USA to reliably support and enable its regional agenda and conception of regional stability, which it regarded as not just in line with its own needs, but as serving the interests of all external powers worried about instability in the MENA. This extended to siding with Riyadh, or at least taking a hands-off approach, on issues Saudi Arabia considered critical to regional stability, such as the war in Yemen or its 2017-2021 dispute with Qatar; and refraining from interventions in regional politics not coordinated with Saudi Arabia first. This meant forgoing

³² Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad bin Salman,” interview by The Economist Editorial Team, *The Economist*, 6 January 2016, available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/01/06/transcript-interview-with-muhammad-bin-salman> [accessed 12 May 2020].

³³ Adel Al-Jubeir, “What's Next in Us-Saudi Relations,” (speech, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 22 March 2018), available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/whats-next-u-s-saudi-relations-he-adel-al-jubeir/> [accessed 14 May 2020].

³⁴ Abdullah bin Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah Al Saud “Saudis Know That U.S. Power Can Bring Lasting Peace,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 April 2017, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-know-that-u-s-power-can-bring-lasting-peace-1492555452> [accessed 3 June 2020].

³⁵ Adel Al-Jubeir, “Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Priorities,” interview by Robin Niblett, *Chatham House*, 21 October 2019, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/saudi-arabias-foreign-policy-priorities> [accessed 12 May 2020]. Also discussed in interviews with: Gulf-based Political Analyst, email interview with author, 21 April 2019; UK-based Saudi Political Analyst, email interview with the author, 17 April 2019.

calls for possibly destabilising political reforms or endorsements of revolutionary change in Arab states, unless Riyadh agreed with it; and dispensing with measures that constituted major changes to facts on the ground in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (such as the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem or potential unilateral annexations of Palestinian territory by Israel) before a settlement can be found that Saudi Arabia and other Arab states feel able to support (Saudi Arabia's views on Israel's role in the region are discussed in greater detail below).³⁶

Ultimately, although Saudi leaders liked to stress that “we are the oldest ally of the United States of America in the Middle East,”³⁷ Saudi Arabia had already grown accustomed to the notion the relationship was primarily transactional. It accepted that the USA would likely be less engaged in the MENA than in the past, and that it had to step up to fill the resulting “strategic void.”³⁸ In the interest of stability, however, Saudi Arabia considered it essential that Washington's actions in the region were not contributing to further instability, and that its approach to the region was consistent and reliable, making it very clear what it would and would not be prepared to do.³⁹

7. 1. 3. Europe

With regards to European countries, Saudi Arabia considered the UK and France, in particular, as important bilateral security partners and potentially influential international players due to their seats on the UN Security Council. However, in terms of enabling stability in the MENA, it viewed their role, in effect, as extensions of the USA's engagement in the region. Together with the rest of Europe they could, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, make an important contribution to the region's economic development through closer cooperation on commerce and trade. But politically and strategically, it wanted them to lend support only to regional forces working for stability — i.e. the Kingdom itself — and refrain from supporting those causing instability, for example by engaging

³⁶ Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, “Saudi Arabia Slams Recent Moves on Jerusalem,” 18 December 2018, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/1509906/saudi-arabia-slams-recent-moves-jerusalem>. [accessed 4 June 2020]; Leen Alfaisal, “Saudi FM Condemns Israel Plans to Annex Parts of the West Bank,” *Al-Arabiya*, 10 June 2020, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/06/10/Saudi-FM-condemns-Israel-plans-to-annex-parts-of-the-West-Bank>. [accessed 12 June 2020].

³⁷ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

³⁸ Saudi Academic, phone interview with author, 11 May 2020.

³⁹ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Shared Security Challenges and Opportunities,” (speech, Israel Policy Forum, Los Angeles, 23 October 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXM-atXcQkA> [accessed 14 May 2020]. Also discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Official, interview with author; Gause, interview with author.

with Iran or promoting democratisation in a region that had more immediate security challenges to overcome.⁴⁰

7. 1. 4. Russia and China

Russia and China, meanwhile, featured more prominently in Saudi Arabia's conception of stability in the MENA. It did not see either as capable or willing to replace the USA as the most important external power in the region. But it regarded both as bringing a level of clarity and consistency, as well as strong opposition to revolutionary political change, to their approach to the region that it felt comfortable with.⁴¹ Despite having had some major differences with Moscow and Beijing, particularly with regards to their support for the Syrian government throughout the 2010s and their readiness to work with Iran, Saudi Arabia understood both as pragmatic actors whose basic strategic and economic interests in the region mostly aligned with its own.

Economically, it saw Russia and China as important partners, both for the Kingdom itself and the region as a whole. It regarded cooperation with Russia on managing levels of oil production as vital for price stability — even if this involved the potential for major disagreements.⁴² China was already the most important buyer of Middle Eastern oil,⁴³ and Saudi Arabia saw it as an economic power whose global clout is set to only grow further in coming decades.⁴⁴ Politically, it valued the fact that Russia and China's own political systems made their governments less prone to dramatic changes in policy than that of the

⁴⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Koch, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author, 27 February 2019; UK-based Middle East Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 5 April 2019.

⁴¹ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Panel Discussion 'What Season Is Next for the Middle East?'" (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 2 February 2014), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2014/video/panel-discussion-what-season-is-next-for-the-middle-east/filter/video/> [accessed 2 June 2020]. Also discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Researcher at a UK Think Tank, interview with author, 9 April 2020; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (A), interview with author.

⁴² Abdulaziz bin Salman Al-Saud, "Interview," interview by Helima Croft, (24th Congress, Abu Dhabi, 9 September 2019), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySRDBzaG0B0> [accessed 3 June 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Emerging Realities in the Middle East: A Saudi Perspective" (speech, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 9 November 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdgBCwmowKU> [accessed 12 October 2020]. See also: Edward Chow, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: A New Oil Bromance?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 3 November 2017, available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-saudi-arabia-new-oil-bromance>. [accessed 4 June 2020]; Rauf Mammadov, "Saudi-Russia Oil Price War - Paused, but Not Over," *Middle East Institute*, 17 April 2020, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-russia-oil-price-war-paused-not-over>. [accessed 4 June 2020].

⁴³ The Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Saudi Arabia," last updated 15 June 2020, available at: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/sau/>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁴⁴ Al-Jubeir, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Priorities"; Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, "MBC Interviews Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman," interview by Daoud Al-Sheryan, *MBC*, 3 May 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTu-gnfgfjU&frags=pl%2Cwn> [accessed 13 May 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, "Panel Discussion 'What Season Is Next for the Middle East?'"

USA.⁴⁵ It also felt that both were mostly agnostic about the internal political structures of states in the region (i.e. would not call for democratising reforms), and assessed that they generally shared the Kingdom's opposition both to notions of popularly-driven or western-encouraged/instigated regime change and any forms of violent or non-violent political Islam.⁴⁶ In fact, according to Khalid bin Bandar, Saudi Arabia saw China as "a good match" for the Kingdom's own development plans that prioritised economic reform over political change, which might come "down the line."⁴⁷

With regards to addressing questions of regional security in the Middle East during the 2010s and over the near- to mid-term future, Saudi Arabia regarded Russia as the more consequential partner. While Riyadh did not see China "as a geo-strategic power in the region yet,"⁴⁸ it concluded that Russia had "become a key strategic and military broker with more predictability and a clearer strategy than the US."⁴⁹ Saudi Arabia's view of Russia's intervention in Syria was demonstrative of this. The Saudi government sharply condemned Russia for supporting President Al-Assad⁵⁰ — Turki Al-Faisal described him as "father of all terrorists in Syria."⁵¹ But, it saw in Russia's protection of the Syrian regime precisely the kind of uncompromising security guarantee it wanted for itself and its closest partners in the region.⁵² Accordingly, Saudi Arabia was careful not to let its expanding ties with Russia be forestalled by competing positions on Syria. In 2016, Al-Jubeir even argued that the Saudi-Russian "disagreement" over Syria was "more of a tactical one than a strategic one."⁵³ Towards the end of the

⁴⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Jonathan Fulton (Assistant Professor, Zayed University, UAE), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019; Gulf-based Political Analyst, interview with author; Steffen Hertog (Professor, London School of Economics), email interview with author, 8 April 2019; Researcher at a UK Think Tank, interview with author.

⁴⁶ Discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Former US Defence Official, interview with author, 15 October 2019; German Middle East analyst, phone interview with author, 24 April 2019; Emile Hokayem (Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies), interview with author, 27 March 2019.

⁴⁷ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

⁴⁸ Hertog, interview with author.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Adel Al-Jubeir, "The Region after the Nuclear Negotiations," (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 31 October 2015), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2015-0220/plenary2-41e0/al-jubeir-1b08> [accessed 16 May 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal," (speech, 24th Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 14 October 2015), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKkTG-VG6Es&feature=youtu.be> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁵¹ T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Address," (24th Arab-US Policymakers Conference).

⁵² Discussed in interviews with: Former British Diplomat, phone interview with author, 29 March 2019; Neil Quilliam (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 26 February 2019.

⁵³ Adel Al-Jubeir, "I Don't Think World War III Is Going to Happen in Syria," interview by Samiha Shafy and Bernhard Zand, *Der Spiegel*, 19 February 2016, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir-on-syrian-war-a-1078337.html> [accessed 14 May 2020].

2010s, in particular, Saudi leaders and officials emphasised their optimism that the “growing rapprochement”⁵⁴ with Moscow could secure Russian support in efforts to contain the regional ambitions of both Iran and Turkey — particularly in Syria, but also in the wider region.⁵⁵ In a 2018 interview, Mohammed bin Salman told *Time* that “I believe Bashar is staying for now,”⁵⁶ that he viewed Syria as “part of the Russian influence in the Middle East,”⁵⁷ and that Russian control over Damascus “could reduce the Iranian influence.”⁵⁸

In sum, external powers — most importantly the USA, but also Russia, China and European countries — played an important enabling role in Saudi Arabia’s conception of stability in the MENA. Primarily, it wanted them to consistently and reliably uphold the region’s status quo system. Ideally, Saudi Arabia wanted external powers to support the Kingdom’s regional agenda, but it mostly saw their involvement with individual Arab countries, even if it did not agree with the particulars, in pragmatic terms. Ultimately, while Saudi Arabia saw the region through a zero-sum lens when it came to other regional countries, this was not the case with the global powers. For Iran or Turkey to exercise more influence over another Arab state than the Kingdom had itself was anathema to the Saudi conception of stability, but it could live with Russian hegemony in Syria, for example, particularly if that meant that Iranian and Turkish influence would be curbed. In fact, when it came to external powers influencing the internal politics of Arab states, Saudi Arabia saw Russia and China as less problematic than the US or European tendency to push for liberalising political change. Finally, Saudi Arabia was accustomed to external powers competing for influence in the MENA. It saw this as a double-edged sword: On the one hand, it saw opportunities in competition if it meant that growing Chinese and Russian involvement in the region would motivate the USA to remain engaged too.⁵⁹ On the other hand, it wanted to avoid, at all cost, a situation in which global power competition placed constraints on the Kingdom’s own international relations. At the end of the 2010s, at least, a Saudi diplomat assessed that “we are well

⁵⁴ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Full Interview,” interview by Hadley Gamble, *CNBC*, 13 October 2019, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BV2nwr-Q4k8> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁵⁵ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME”; T. F. Al-Saud, “Full Interview.” Also discussed in interview with: Gulf-based Political Analyst, interview with author.

⁵⁶ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Former US Defence Official, interview with author; Fulton, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (A), interview with author. See also: Samaan, *Strategic Hedging*.

positioned”⁶⁰ to maintain and build strategic ties with “both sides,” west and east.

7. 2. The Organisation of Regional Order

The organisation of a regional order in the MENA that Saudi Arabia considered conducive to stability — in other words, in which Saudi Arabia felt safe and able to protect and pursue its interests — has been a challenge that has occupied the Kingdom’s leaders throughout their country’s history. As noted in the previous chapter, Saudi Arabia has long perceived itself as surrounded by a historically “conflict-cursed region.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, the upheaval of the 2010s forced the Kingdom to confront the question of regional order with renewed urgency. The new Saudi leadership, in particular, saw regional instability not just as an acute and increasing threat to their country’s present, but also as an impediment to its ambitious domestic agenda, and therefore the Kingdom’s future. As Khalid bin Bandar put it: “We are sick and tired of the region being a disaster.”⁶² Saudi Arabia’s considerations regarding regional order were shaped by its perception that many of the developments in the MENA during the 2010s (and the 2000s) had been contrary to its interests, progressively weakening the Kingdom’s position in the region. This included what Riyadh saw as the likely permanent US retrenchment from the region, as described above. Most importantly, however, Saudi Arabia perceived a growing “power imbalance vis-a-vis Iran”⁶³ and, to a slightly lesser extent, a Turkish encroachment on the Arab world, tied to Ankara’s patronage of MB-style political Islam.

As the previous chapter shows, Saudi Arabia has long seen and presented itself as the moderate centre and leading defender of the region’s status quo state system against various revisionist powers seeking to dominate the region. Further, due to its size, wealth and special cultural and religious status, the Kingdom has always felt an obligation to assume responsibility in regional affairs, and regarded itself as the ultimate target of any power’s campaign for regional hegemony.⁶⁴ In this context, it has perceived Iran and the Turkey-MB nexus as contemporary threats — to the region and itself — akin to those posed

⁶⁰ Althari, interview with author.

⁶¹ T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech.”

⁶² K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

⁶³ T. F. Al-Saud, “The Middle East and its Future Directions.”

⁶⁴ This is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

by Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s and 60s, or Baathist Iraq until the early 1990s.⁶⁵ From Saudi Arabia's perspective, to serve as the basis for regional stability, a regional order in the Middle East therefore had to be centred around two closely related principles: First, it had to be based on norms of state sovereignty and, in the words of Al-Jubeir, a commitment by states to "comport themselves according to international law [and] don't interfere in other countries."⁶⁶ Second, no regional power could achieve a hegemonic position giving it more influence over any given state than Saudi Arabia could exercise itself; the Kingdom viewed regional affairs and the evolution of the regional order through a zero-sum lens.⁶⁷

7. 2. 1. Arab Sovereignty

Saudi Arabia's insistence on sovereignty as a fundamental principle of regional order was primarily rooted in national security considerations. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia ensured that it was enshrined in the foundations of regional organisations such as the Arab League⁶⁸ and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC),⁶⁹ as well as the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which Saudi Arabia set up in 2015.⁷⁰ The GCC charter emphasised integration, not sovereignty, as its primary objective,⁷¹ but the organisation's structure and consensus-based decision-making mechanisms were

⁶⁵ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Paul Noble, "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? Regional Pressures and Constraints," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds. Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 67-165.

⁶⁶ Adel Al-Jubeir, "Interview," interview by Michael Stephens, *Royal United Services Institute*, 20 June 2019, available at: <https://rusi.org/event/briefing-saudi-foreign-minister-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir> [accessed 16 May 2020].

⁶⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Former US Defence Official, interview with author; Jane Kinninmont (Head of Programmes, The Elders), interview with author, 4 April 2019; Christopher Phillips (Reader, Queen Mary, University of London), interview with author, 26 March 2019. The notion that many countries in the MENA see regional politics in zero-sum terms is well established: Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policy in the Middle East," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 1-34; Peter Jones, *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1998).

⁶⁸ League of Arab States, "Charter of the League of Arab States [ميثاق جامعة الدول العربية]," available at: <http://www.leagueofarabstates.net/ar/aboutlas/Pages/Charter.aspx>. [accessed 4 June 2020].

⁶⁹ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, "Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation," available at: https://www.oic-oci.org/upload/documents/charter/en/oic_charter_2018_en.pdf. [accessed 4 June 2020].

⁷⁰ Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, "About IMCTC," available at: <https://imctc.org/English/About>. [accessed 4 June 2020].

⁷¹ Gulf Cooperation Council, "The Charter [النظام الأساسي]," available at: <https://www.gcc-sg.org/ar-sa/AboutGCC/Pages/Primarylaw.aspx>. [accessed 4 June 2020].

nevertheless designed to protect each members' independence.⁷² However, the GCC was also an organisation in which Saudi Arabia could always be certain of its position as the dominant power.⁷³ As described in the previous chapter, despite the consistent protestations of Saudi leaders,⁷⁴ the Kingdom's rejection of any regional power attaining hegemony in the MENA did not necessarily apply to its own role in the region. At the very least, Saudi Arabia saw itself as endowed with natural and unique leadership privileges and responsibilities, certainly within the Arab portion of the MENA. At most, its leaders believed that "the Middle East is theirs and everyone should fall in line."⁷⁵

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the MENA was a primarily Arab region and this needed to be reflected in the regional order. Non-Arab states could be part of this order, but their involvement had to be limited to the economic sphere, at least in the first instance. According to Al-Jubeir, "if we can link the Middle East into some type of common market, we all benefit, including the Israelis,"⁷⁶ Turks and Iranians. But their participation in political and security matters, both in and among Arab states, required explicit agreement from the Arab core and, most importantly, Saudi Arabia itself.

Initially, this Saudi insistence on the MENA's Arab character may appear paradoxical. Historically, Saudi Arabia was a steadfast opponent of Arab nationalism. In the 1960s, it set up international organisations such as the Muslim World League and the OIC to — amongst other objectives — balance against Arab nationalists like Nasser, and widen the context for regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict beyond the Arab world.⁷⁷ Yet, as Saudi Arabia has seen Arabism diminish as a major force in regional politics capable

⁷² Saud Al-Tamamy, "GCC Membership Expansion: Possibilities And Obstacles," *Dossiers* (Doha: Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 2015); Abdulla Baabood, "Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (London: Routledge, 2005), 145-73; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷³ Discussed in interviews with: Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author; Saudi Academic, interview with author. See also: Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia and the GCC States," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 75-91.

⁷⁴ Adel, Al-Jubeir, "Saudi Ambassador Holds Press Conference on Yemen," (speech, Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington DC, 15 April 2015), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w96c4FLunPE> [accessed 4 June 2020]; Al-Jubeir, "I Don't Think World War III Is Going to Happen in Syria"; Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud," interview by Frank Gardner, *Royal United Services Institute*, 14 October 2019, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/event/conversation-hrh-prince-khalid-bin-bandar-al-saud-ambassador-kingdom-saudi-arabia-united> [accessed 12 May 2020].

⁷⁵ French Gulf Analyst, phone interview with author, 20 April 2020.

⁷⁶ Al-Jubeir, "What's Next in US-Saudi Relations."

⁷⁷ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*; Menno Preuschaft, "Islam and Identity in Foreign Policy," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 16-29.

of undermining state sovereignty, and the power traditional contenders for Arab leadership (e.g. Egypt, Syria, Iraq) decline, its concerns in this regard have abated.⁷⁸ Instead, it considered the region's non-Arab powers, Iran and Turkey, as the primary claimants to regional hegemony and threats to regional sovereignty norms. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's conceptions of regional order can be analysed most effectively in two parts: Its view of the roles the three non-Arab regional powers Iran, Turkey and Israel could play; and its preferences for the organisation of inter-Arab relations.

7. 2. 2. Iran and Turkey

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, a regional order capable of providing a basis for stability in the MENA could only include Iran and Turkey if they accepted that as non-Arab states they could only ever be peripheral actors in inter-Arab relations. They needed to cease what Saudi Arabia considered to be their campaigns to meddle in the domestic affairs of, and insert themselves into the disputes between, Arab states. To this end, Saudi leaders and officials habitually argued that normalisation with Iran was only possible if it "acts like a nation state;"⁷⁹ and called for Turkey to revert to its regional policy of the early 2000s, before President Erdogan "developed hegemonic inclinations"⁸⁰ in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia saw both Iran and Turkey as formidable challengers to its status as a regional leader, with large populations, at least potentially strong economies, and substantial military power. Crucially, it saw both as trying to gain influence over Arab states by leveraging transnational political projects couched in ideologies drawing on interpretations of Islam that diverged from the Kingdom's favoured religious orthodoxy: Iran by promoting its Islamic Revolution and making an explicit claim to (at least Shia) religious leadership;⁸¹ Turkey by using cultural-religious soft power derived from the historical legacy

⁷⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Diplomat, phone interview with author, 9 April 2019; French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; John Jenkins (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 18, April 2019.

⁷⁹ Adel Al-Jubeir, "A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir at the Council on Foreign Relations," interview by Richard Haass, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 September 2019, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-minister-adel-al-jubeir-saudi-arabia-0> [accessed 19 May 2020].

⁸⁰ T. F. Al-Saud, "Full Interview."

⁸¹ Discussed in interviews with: Former British Intelligence Officer, interview with author, 10 April 2019; Jenkins, interview with author. See also: Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst and Company, 2017); Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020).

of the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate,⁸² and positioning itself as the patron and “a kind of face of the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁸³

It is important to note that throughout the 2010s, Turkey clearly occupied “second place”⁸⁴ in Saudi Arabia’s concerns about regional order, far below that of Iran. A return to the relatively close Saudi-Turkish relationship that existed during the 2000s⁸⁵ and Turkey’s integration into a regional order Saudi Arabia considered amenable to its interest, required substantial changes in Ankara’s regional behaviour. Most obviously, Turkey needed to significantly reduce its support for the MB and revolutionary change in Arab states.⁸⁶ It certainly needed to refrain from what the Saudi government considered the meddling in its domestic affairs through the continuous amplification of the controversy around the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, including accusations of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s personal culpability.⁸⁷ Finally, it needed to end its support for Qatar in its dispute with Riyadh and other Arab governments.⁸⁸ Ultimately, however, although the deployment of Turkish troops to Qatar since 2017 evoked a certain “historic existential fear”⁸⁹ reminiscent of an era of Ottoman regional domination, Saudi Arabia still considered the Turkish threat to regional and — more importantly — its own national security to be manageable. From the Kingdom’s perspective, as long as Ankara had no like-minded ally in another major Arab state, as could have been the case had the MB-led government survived in Egypt, or Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups had achieved power in Damascus, the urgency to confront Turkey paled compared to the need to deal with Iran. Saudi Arabia strongly opposed Turkey’s actions in

⁸² Discussed in interviews with: Christopher Davidson (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), phone interview with author, 17 April 2019; French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Gause, interview with author.

⁸³ William Patey (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 15 April 2019.

⁸⁴ Partrick, interview with author.

⁸⁵ Althari, interview with author. See also: Umer Karim, “Saudi–Turkish Relations: Is a Rapprochement Possible?” *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 22 August 2019, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/08/22/saudi-turkish-relations-is-a-rapprochement-possible/>. [accessed 4 June 2020]; Neil Partrick, “Saudi Arabia and Turkey,” in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016) 228–41.

⁸⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Gulf-based Political Analyst, interview with author; Saudi Journalist, phone interview with author, 22 November 2019; UK-based Saudi Political Analyst, interview with author.

⁸⁷ Karim, “Saudi-Turkish Relations.”

⁸⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Saudi Journalist, interview with author; UK-based Saudi Political Analyst, interview with author.

⁸⁹ Partrick, interview with author.

northern Syria⁹⁰ or Libya,⁹¹ but neither were as threatening as Iran's hostile presence in Arab states across the Kingdom's northern and southern borders.

Accordingly, Saudi Arabia's narrative about if and how Iran could be integrated into a functioning regional order was very maximalist. It effectively tied the prospect of normal relations between Iran and the Arab world to a complete change in Iran's regional policy and, ultimately, substantial change of the regime in Tehran itself. As Turki Al-Faisal put it, "there can be no flexibility" on the matter of Iran "inserting itself into the domestic politics of Arab countries,"⁹² and in Al-Jubeir's words, "only by ridding the world of this toxic and radical mind-set," which in his view constituted the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic and its revolutionary cause in the MENA, could stability be "restored to the region."⁹³ Yet, contrary to the often bellicose rhetoric in the Saudi media,⁹⁴ the Kingdom did not want a war with Iran, neither led by itself, nor by the USA or anyone else.⁹⁵ In fact, perceptions of increasing risks of military escalation appeared to be one of the few factors moving the Saudi government to soften its tone vis-a-vis Tehran; following the Soleimani assassination in January 2020, for example.⁹⁶

In general, however, it was clear that Saudi Arabia was not interested in approaches aimed at containing, much less accommodating, Iran's position in the region, especially not as it saw Tehran's influence expand during the

⁹⁰ K. b. B. Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH"; See also: Al-Arabiya, "Saudi Arabia Condemns Turkish 'Aggression' in Northeast Syria [التركي شمال شرق سوريا]", 9 October 2019, available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2019/10/09/السعودية-تدين-العدوان-التركي-شمال-شرق-سوريا>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; Hani Al-Thaheri, "Erdogan on a Mission to Free Daesh [أردوغان في مهمة تحرير داعش]", *Okaz*, 13 October 2019, available at: <https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/na/1750955>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

⁹¹ See for example: Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, "Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain Condemn Turkish Decision to Send Troops to Libya [السعودية ومصر والبحرين تدين قرار تركيا إرسال قوات إلى ليبيا]", 6 January 2020, available at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2068471/السعودية-ومصر-والبحرين-تدين-قرار-تركيا-إرسال-قوات-إلى-ليبيا>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; Abdelrahman Al-Tariri, "Turkish Piracy in Libya [القرصان التركي في ليبيا]", *Okaz*, 16 December 2019, available at: <https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/na/1760667>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

⁹² T. F. Al-Saud, "Keynote Speech."

⁹³ Adel Al-Jubeir, "Iran Can't Whitewash Its Record of Terror," *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2016, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-cant-whitewash-its-record-of-terror-1474234929>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

⁹⁴ Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, "The Inevitable Clash with Iran [إيران مع إيران]", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 18 May 2019, available at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1727466/عبد-الرحمن-الراشد-إحتمية-الصدام-مع-إيران>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; Arab News, "Editorial: Iran Must Not Go Unpunished," 16 May 2019, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1497651/editorial>. [accessed 5 June 2020]. See also: Andrew Leber, "Differences of Opinion? Saudi Op-Eds and Confrontation with Iran," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 23 May 2019, available at: <https://agsiw.org/differences-of-opinion-saudi-op-eds-and-confrontation-with-iran/>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

⁹⁵ Al-Jubeir, "A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir"; K. b. B. Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH."

⁹⁶ Yaroslav Trofimov, "America's Mideast Allies Want to Sit out Iranian-U.S. Confrontation," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 January 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-mideast-allies-brace-for-blowback-from-iranian-generals-killing-11578436178>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

2010s.⁹⁷ A situation in which Iran was, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, dominating Lebanon, Syria and — even more importantly — the Kingdom's immediate neighbours Iraq and Yemen, was unacceptable for Riyadh. The missile strikes on Saudi cities launched by the Yemeni Houthis during the latter half of the 2010s⁹⁸ and the attacks on major Saudi oil installations in late 2019⁹⁹ reinforced this conviction that any expansion of Iranian influence in the region constituted a growing, direct threat to the Kingdom's national security.¹⁰⁰ For Saudi Arabia, US President Obama's 2016 suggestion that Saudi Arabia should "find an effective way to share the neighbourhood"¹⁰¹ with Iran was therefore a non-starter. Beyond tactical back-channel engagements to de-escalate in moments of particularly high tensions, the Saudi government was loath to openly acknowledge Iran as a negotiation partner to resolve the conflicts in Syria or Yemen, even though it viewed Tehran as a main stakeholder in both. It feared that this would legitimise Iran's continued and long-term presence and influence in these countries, which it considered anathema to its interests and conception of stability. Instead, Riyadh has persistently rejected the notion that Iran should even have a seat at the table. A 2017 statement by Al-Jubeir is illustrative of this: "For 2000 years, Iran has not put down one brick in the construction of Yemen, so why are they there."¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Thomas Juneau (Associate Professor, University of Ottawa), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019; Saudi Journalist, interview with author.

⁹⁸ Nada Altaher and Bianca Britton, "Missile Hits Arrivals Hall of Saudi Arabia Airport, Injuring 26, Official Says," *CNN*, 12 June 2019, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/12/middleeast/saudi-airport-houthi-missile-intl/index.html>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; BBC, "Yemen Rebel Ballistic Missile 'Intercepted over Riyadh'," 19 December 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-42412729>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; Mohammed Benmansour, "Yemen's Houthis Reach Saudi Capital with Missiles for First Time since Covid Ceasefire," *Reuters*, 23 June 2020, available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-security-saudi/yemens-houthis-reach-saudi-capital-with-missiles-for-first-time-since-covid-ceasefire-idUKKBN23U0LH>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

⁹⁹ Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and U.S. Blames Iran," *The New York Times*, 14 September 2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

¹⁰⁰ Adel Al-Jubeir, "Briefing by Saudi Foreign Minister," (speech, Royal United Services Institute, 20 June 2019), available at: <https://rusi.org/event/briefing-saudi-foreign-minister-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir> [accessed 18 May 2020]; Khalid bin Salman Al-Saud, "Why Iran's Malign Behavior Must Be Confronted - Not Appeased," *Arab News*, 23 July 2018, available at: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1343571>. [accessed 16 May 2020]; Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, "Mohammad Bin Salman Denies Ordering Khashoggi Murder, but Says He Takes Responsibility for it," interview by Norah O'Donnell, *CBS 60 Minutes*, 29 September 2019, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mohammad-bin-salman-denies-ordering-khashoggi-murder-but-says-he-takes-responsibility-for-it-60-minutes-2019-09-29/> [accessed 14 May 2020].

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> [accessed 15 September 2019].

¹⁰² Adel Al-Jubeir, "Statement by Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir," (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 19 February 2017), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2017/video/statement-by-adel-bin-ahmed-al-jubeir/filter/video/> [accessed 12 May 2020].

Saudi Arabia's views regarding international efforts to curb Iran's nuclear programme can be understood in a similar vein. Riyadh was clearly concerned that possessing nuclear weapons capabilities could further strengthen Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony,¹⁰³ and on several occasions hinted that it would feel compelled to acquire nuclear weapons itself in such a scenario.¹⁰⁴ Yet, it was also opposed to any international agreement that, like the JCPOA, only dealt with the nuclear file, leaving out Iran's regional behaviour and potentially even paving the way to normalising Iran on the international stage.¹⁰⁵ In essence, Saudi Arabia therefore wanted to see a regional and international effort, ideally led-, but at the very least backed, by the USA and other external powers, that first halts Iran's regional behaviour and then "actively rolls back Iranian power an influence"¹⁰⁶ throughout the region — by any means short of full-scale war. Realistic or not, in Saudi Arabia's conception this was the only way in which the regional order could ever be truly conducive to stability.

7. 2. 3. Israel

Meanwhile, the inclusion of third non-Arab regional power, Israel, in the regional order presented a different challenge for Saudi Arabia. From Riyadh's perspective, Israel posed no threat to the Kingdom's national security, nor was it a regional power seeking to influence the domestic or international affairs of Arab states in a manner contrary to the Kingdom's interest. In fact, Saudi Arabia considered Israel as a potentially valuable partner in regional affairs: Israel's technologically advanced economy represented an attractive counterpart for the Kingdom's own economic development; and, most importantly, Israel was a powerful and committed fellow opponent of Iran and the emergence of Islamist political projects in the region.¹⁰⁷ According to Mohammed bin Salman, "there are a lot of interests we share with Israel."¹⁰⁸ Yet, it was also clear that for Saudi Arabia open bilateral relations, and wider multilateral Arab-Israeli cooperation

¹⁰³ Al-Jubeir, "In Conversation with HE Adel Al-Jubeir."

¹⁰⁴ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to TIME."

¹⁰⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Juneau, interview with author; Quilliam, interview with author; Saudi Journalist, interview with author. See also: K. b. S. Al-Saud, "Why Iran's Malign Behavior Must Be Confronted."

¹⁰⁶ Juneau, interview with author.

¹⁰⁷ Discussed in interviews with: German Middle East Analyst, interview with author; Jens Heibach (Research Fellow, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018; Thomas Lippman (Author of *Saudi Arabia on the Edge*), phone interview the author, 1 May 2019; Lord David Richards of Herstmonceux (Former British Chief of Defence Staff), interview with author, 8 April 2019; Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁰⁸ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'."

was only feasible on the basis of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Riyadh has consistently promoted the Arab Peace Initiative (API), put forward by King Abdullah 2002, as the most suitable foundation for peace.¹⁰⁹ The generally supportive attitude, particularly amongst the younger generation of Saudi leaders, towards the Trump administration's efforts to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, which were widely regarded as heavily tilted in Israel's favour, indicated a willingness accept concessions to Israel in addition to those contained in the API.¹¹⁰ Yet, the Saudi government's protestations against the move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem in 2018¹¹¹ and the prospect of Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank in 2020,¹¹² also demonstrated the limits of how far Riyadh felt able and/or prepared to go. Similarly, while it tacitly approved of the agreements to normalise relations between Israel and some of the Kingdom's closest regional partners, the UAE and Bahrain, and increased its own barely deniable direct engagement with the Israeli government, Saudi Arabia did not join the Abraham Accords.¹¹³ Aware of the continued salience of the Palestinian cause amongst Arab populations, including its own,¹¹⁴ Saudi Arabia felt that as the leader of the Arab world "it has to defend some notion of Arab pride."¹¹⁵ Even though "there is no question," as Khalid bin Bandar put it,

¹⁰⁹ S. b. A. Al-Saud, "Speech of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques"; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Viewpoint with James Zogby: Prince Turki Al-Faisal," interview by James Zogby, *Viewpoint with James Zogby*, 15 September 2011, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i7wq6EQ9G8> [accessed 10 May 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: Althari, interview with author.

¹¹⁰ Discussed in interview with: Ian Black (Senior Visiting Fellow, London School of Economics), interview with author, 19 March 2019. See also: Ian Black, "Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation" *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (London: Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019); Daoud Kuttab, Afnan Nasr and Yasmine Issa, "Don't Reject New Trump Peace Plan, Palestine's Abbas Urged," *Arab News*, 1 February 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1621396/middle-east>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

¹¹¹ Saudi Press Agency, "Foreign Minister: The Palestinian Issue Is a Priority for the Kingdom, and We Reject the Decision to Move the American Embassy to Jerusalem [القضية الفلسطينية قضية المملكة الأولى] وزير الخارجية: القضية الفلسطينية قضية المملكة الأولى [القضية الفلسطينية قضية المملكة الأولى] ورفض قرار نقل السفارة الأمريكية للقدس", 17 May 2018, available at: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/1767298>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Prince Turki al Faisal: No, Mr. Trump, Jerusalem is not the capital of Israel," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2017, available at: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-turki-al-faisal-trump-jerusalem-not-capital-of-israel-20171215-story.html> [Accessed 11 May 2018].

¹¹² Al-Arabiya, "Saudi Arabia: Israeli Plans to Annex Palestinian Lands a Violation of International Law [السعودية: خطط إسرائيل لضم أراض فلسطينية انتهاك للقانون الدولي]", 24 June 2020, available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2020/06/24/السعودية-خطط-اسرائيل-لضم-اراض-فلسطينية-انتهاك-للقانون-الدولي>. [accessed 2 July 2020]; Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, "Saudi Arabia: Israeli Annexation of Parts of the West Bank an Escalation That Threatens Peace [السعودية: ضم إسرائيل أجزاء من الضفة تصعيد يهدد السلام]", 11 June 2020, available at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2328316/السعودية-ضم-اسرائيل-اجزاء-من-الضفة-تصعيد-يهدد-السلام>. [accessed 2 July 2020].

¹¹³ See for example: Natan Sachs and Tamara Cofman-Wittes, "Saudi-Israeli Relations: The Curious Case of a Neom Meeting Denied," *Brookings*, 25 November 2020, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/25/saudi-israeli-relations-the-curious-case-of-a-neom-meeting-denied/>. [accessed 26 November 2020]; Michael Stephens, "Israel and the Gulf States: Normalisation and Lingering Challenges," *Royal United Services Institute*, 15 September 2020, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/commentary/israel-and-gulf-states-normalisation-and-lingering-challenges>. [accessed 17 September 2020].

¹¹⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Black, interview with author; Former British Government Official, interview with author, 25 February 2019; UK-based Political Risk Analyst, interview with author, 8 April 2019.

¹¹⁵ French Gulf Analyst, interview with author.

that “peace between the Palestinians and Israelis would dramatically improve the Middle East,”¹¹⁶ Saudi Arabia therefore could not endorse a solution that was not also accepted by at least the internationally recognised Palestinian leadership.¹¹⁷ As of the end of the 2010s, Saudi Arabia was therefore exasperated by what it regarded as the intransigence of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders,¹¹⁸ whose unwillingness to compromise it regarded as a major impediment to the kind of Arab-Israeli normalisation it ultimately favoured as a key component of regional order conducive to stability.

7. 2. 4. Uncontested Leadership

Within the Arab world, Saudi Arabia’s primary concern was not the presence of a rival claimant to regional leadership — Qatar did not rise to that status in Riyadh’s estimation — but rather the lack of Arab unity and internal fragility of various Arab states, which, in turn, provided openings for Turkish and Iranian influence. It is important to note that some Arab states were more important than others in the Kingdom’s considerations about regional order during the 2010s, both in terms of their internal politics and their foreign political orientations. Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous country and historically the most obvious alternative contender for Arab leadership, had always been at the top of that list, closely followed by Saudi Arabia’s other neighbours: Yemen, the GCC monarchies and Jordan.¹¹⁹ The stability of, and political alignment with, Morocco, another Arab monarchy, was important for Saudi Arabia, but less so than Jordan, which has long been a strategically important partner for Riyadh in the Levant, particularly with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹²⁰ Lebanon, Syria and Iraq have also traditionally been important for Saudi Arabia, both as adversaries and partners, but in the 21st century, it saw all three

¹¹⁶ K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ For the most vocal criticism to date see: Bandar bin Sultan Al-Saud, “Prince Bandar Bin Sultan’s Interview on Israel-Palestine Conflict,” interview by Al-Arabiya Editorial Team, *Al-Arabiya*, 5 October 2020, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/10/05/Full-transcript-Part-one-of-Prince-Bandar-bin-Sultan-s-interview-with-Al-Arabiya> [accessed 6 October 2020]. Previously, criticism tended to be reported primarily as rumours or hearsay; see for example: Haaretz, “Palestinians Should ‘Shut up’ or Make Peace, Saudi Crown Prince Told Jewish Leaders,” 1 May 2018, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians-should-shut-up-or-make-peace-said-saudi-crown-prince-1.6036624>. [accessed 6 October 2020].

¹¹⁹ Ali Shihabi (Saudi Commentator), phone interview with author, 16 April 2020.

¹²⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Althari, interview with author; Peter Millett (former British Ambassador to Jordan and Libya), phone interview with author, 25 November 2019. See also: Saud Al-Tamamy, “Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security,” in *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, ed. Henner Fuertig (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 191-208; Neil Partrick, *Saudi Arabia and Jordan: Friends in Adversity* (London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2013).

primarily through the lens of Iranian expansionism in the region. The Arab states in the Horn of Africa, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia have become more important to Saudi Arabia during the 2010s, both in the context of Turkish (and Qatari) activities in the region, and the Kingdom's increased interest in its Red Sea neighbourhood in general.¹²¹ Finally, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya were at the bottom of Saudi Arabia's list of priorities.¹²²

Saudi Arabia's views regarding the stability of individual Arab states is discussed in the next section of this chapter. As for the organisation of inter-Arab relations, Saudi Arabia was not concerned with controlling the minutiae of every country's foreign policy, as long as this did not openly contradict or challenge the Kingdom's own regional agenda. For example, it was frustrated with, but ultimately tolerant of, Egypt's refusal to contribute significantly to the intervention in Yemen, also recognising that the government in Cairo had pressing domestic issues to handle.¹²³ In general, Saudi Arabia's main concern was that Arab states, at least those not already dominated by Tehran, formed a united front against Iran, and otherwise adhered to norms of non-interference in each other's political affairs. This is the context for Saudi Arabia's dispute with Qatar. It justified the political and economic isolation of the Sheikdom from 2017-2021 by describing Qatar as having consistently refused to be "part of the system,"¹²⁴ both in the GCC and the wider Arab world, and accusing it of "sponsoring radicals, [...] inciting people" and becoming "a base of the Muslim Brotherhood."¹²⁵ Indeed, in Riyadh's view, Qatar behaved even more egregiously since 2017, deepening its ties with Iran and Turkey, and ramping up its anti-Saudi media coverage, for example.¹²⁶ The reconciliation with Doha in January 2021 owed more to Saudi Arabia's desire to mollify the incoming

¹²¹ Abdelaziz Aluwaisheg, "Council of Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to Play Critical Role," *Arab News*, 13 January 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1612471>. [accessed 6 June 2020]; International Crisis Group, "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," *Middle East Report 206* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019).

¹²² Discussed in interviews with: Tarek Megerisi (Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations), interview with author, 21 November 2019; UK-based Libya Analyst, phone interview with author, 3 December 2019. See also: Mohammed El-Katiri, "Saudi Arabia and the Maghreb," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 186-207; Toby Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah: Gulf States' Foreign Policy Towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings," in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44-60.

¹²³ Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Egypt: An Uneasy Relationship," *The Caravan*, no. 1713 (2016).

¹²⁴ K. b. B. Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH."

¹²⁵ Adel Al-Jubeir, "A Conversation with Adel Al-Jubeir," interview by Isobel Coleman, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 September 201, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir> [accessed 16 May 2020].

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*; K. b. B. Al-Saud, "A Conversation with HRH."

Democratic administration in Washington and acceptance that the pressure on its neighbour was not having the desired effect, than any substantial foreign political concessions on Qatar's part.¹²⁷

In principle, Saudi Arabia liked the region's existing multilateral organisations, the Arab League and the GCC,¹²⁸ and according to a former Saudi diplomat, it remained "very important to us to be seen as leaders"¹²⁹ in these bodies. Yet, the decision-making systems of both organisations (the Arab League's decisions are only binding for those agreeing to them,¹³⁰ and the GCC acts based on the consensus of all members¹³¹) rendered them ineffective in Saudi Arabia's view: It felt that Qatar's foreign policy had undermined the GCC, and in the Arab League at least Lebanon and Iraq were unlikely to speak out against Iran.¹³² Consequently, Saudi Arabia sought to form new, ad-hoc coalitions outside these organisations, including the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet,¹³³ the IMCTC and the Council of the Arab and African countries of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.¹³⁴ In all of these initiatives, Riyadh sought to build on its "close-knit relationship"¹³⁵ with the UAE, which had strengthened since 2015,¹³⁶ and "align as many countries strategically as possible."¹³⁷ It portrayed this grouping of states, which according to Mohammed bin Salman also includes Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Yemen (i.e. the exiled government of President Hadi),¹³⁸ as the region's moderate core. Moderate, in this case, meant firmly opposed to revolutionary change in Arab countries, open to good

¹²⁷ Michael Stephens, "Sunshine over the Gulf," *Royal United Services Institute*, 7 January 2021, available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/sunshine-over-gulf>. [accessed 10 March 2021].

¹²⁸ Discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author; Saudi Academic, interview with author.

¹²⁹ Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author.

¹³⁰ League of Arab States, "Charter."

¹³¹ Gulf Cooperation Council, "The Charter."

¹³² Discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author; Hokayem, interview with author; Gerd Nonneman (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 17 April 2018; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

¹³³ The Anti-Terror Quartet consisted of the four states participating in the isolation of Qatar from 2017-2021, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

¹³⁴ Arab News, "Saudi Arabia and 7 Countries Form Council to Secure Red Sea and Gulf of Aden," 6 January 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1609121/saudi-arabia>. [accessed 7 June 2020].

¹³⁵ Althari, interview with author.

¹³⁶ Discussed in interviews with: French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Hokayem, interview with author; Karen Young (Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute), phone interview with author, 7 May 2019.

¹³⁷ Althari, interview with author.

¹³⁸ M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'."

relations with external powers, and opposed to Iran's regional policies.¹³⁹ This was far from the Saudi-led inter-Arab unity Riyadh ideally wanted to see, but as of the end of the 2010s, this was all it could achieve.

In sum, in Saudi Arabia's conception of stability in the MENA, regional order was organised around an Arab core, with the Kingdom itself as its undisputed centre. Most importantly, the region's non-Arab states — Iran, Turkey and, to a lesser extent Israel — had no right to influence what happened inside or between Arab states, at least not more than Saudi Arabia could itself.

7. 3. State-Level Order

Stable Arab states constituted the basis of Saudi Arabia's conception of stability in the MENA. From its perspective, only a stable Arab state could be counted upon to prevent the opening of "a security gap that will be taken advantage of by regional actors like Iran,"¹⁴⁰ and only a stable Arab state could ensure that its territory did not become a "staging post for any rival ideology"¹⁴¹ or destabilising non-state actor. Furthermore, only an Arab region consisting of stable states was one in which Saudi Arabia was not permanently called upon to respond to crises and could find "a little bit of peace and quiet"¹⁴² to focus on its own domestic development agenda. Throughout the 2010s (and long before), Saudi leaders and officials emphasised the Kingdom's commitment to supporting the stability of Arab states across the region, often without going into much detail as to what they meant by this. In fact, according to Khalid bin Bandar, "we are agnostic in terms of the method"¹⁴³ of how stability was achieved in any given country. There was no single Saudi blueprint for stability that the Kingdom considered applicable across the region. Nevertheless, a number of aspects Saudi Arabia regarded as important in the formation of domestic orders conducive to stability can be identified.

The starting point of Saudi Arabia's conception of what constituted stability at the individual state level was the Kingdom itself. Saudi government representatives, academics and commentators frequently described their own system as having

¹³⁹ Adel Al-Jubeir, "CNBC Transcript: Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel Al-Jubeir," interview by Hadley Gamble, *CNBC*, 9 November 2017, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/09/cnbc-transcript-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir.html> [accessed 17 May 2020]; M. b. S. Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'."

¹⁴⁰ Althari, interview with author.

¹⁴¹ Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁴² K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

proven itself as “the model that is most conducive to stability and growth”¹⁴⁴ in the Middle East to date.¹⁴⁵ This narrative was self-serving, but its proponents could cite confirmatory, albeit carefully selected, evidence that cannot be dismissed entirely. They pointed, for example, to the fact that Saudi Arabia’s basic political system and governance structure had remained unchanged since the state’s foundation in 1932, longer than most other states in the region;¹⁴⁶ that the Kingdom had the largest economy in the region;¹⁴⁷ and that it had survived the Arab Uprisings relatively unscathed.¹⁴⁸ The Saudi government did not claim that what it described as its “benevolent monarchy model”¹⁴⁹ could be exported across the region, but it considered itself an authority in judging what could and could not work in the MENA.

7. 3. 1. Socio-Economic Reform and Security

Saudi Arabia has commonly been described as a status quo power in the Middle East.¹⁵⁰ As outlined above, that applied to its view that the region’s existing state system needed to remain intact. Its position regarding the socio-economic and political systems of order in individual Arab states across the region (including the Kingdom itself), however, was more nuanced. The Arab Uprisings and their aftermath convinced Saudi Arabia that change was necessary, but that it needed to be controlled by strong governments. “Evolution, not revolution”¹⁵¹ became its often-repeated mantra. From Saudi Arabia’s perspective, “political revolutions deform [...] and lead to chaos”¹⁵² that

¹⁴⁴ Althari, interview with author.

¹⁴⁵ Discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Former Saudi Diplomat, interview with author. See also: Al-Jubeir, “The Region after the Nuclear Negotiations”; Al-Jubeir, “Finding a New Equilibrium.” And op-eds to this effect too: Arab News, “Kingdom Role Model of Unity, Stability,” 5 October 2012, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/kingdom-role-model-unity-stability>. [accessed 6 June 2020]; Nayef bin Marzouq Al-Fahadi, “Saudi Arabia: Stability in the Face of Chaos [الاستقرار في السعودية. وجه الفوضى],” *Okaz*, 12 January 2020, available at: <https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/authors/2004968>. [accessed 6 June 2020]; Reem Daffa, “Saudi Arabia Remains a Bastion of Economic Stability,” *Arab News*, 6 November 2019, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1579671>. [accessed 6 June 2020].

¹⁴⁶ K. b. B. Al-Saud, “A Conversation with HRH.”

¹⁴⁷ Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “Al-Arabiya Interviews Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman,” interview by Al-Arabiya Editorial Team, *Al-Arabiya*, 25 April 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jju7ErdRot0&frags=pl%2Cwn> [accessed 6 June 2020]; T. F. Al-Saud, “Keynote Address,” (22nd Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference). Also discussed in interview with: Althari, interview with author.

¹⁴⁸ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad bin Salman.” Also discussed in interviews with: K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author; Althari, interview with author.

¹⁴⁹ Althari, interview with author.

¹⁵⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Black, interview with author; French Gulf Analyst, interview with author; Gulf-based Political Analyst, interview with author; Saudi Academic, interview with author; Saudi Journalist, interview with author; Baraa Shiban (Caseworker, Reprieve), interview with author, 1 April 2019; Shihabi, phone interview with author.

¹⁵¹ T. F. Al-Saud, “Viewpoint with James Zogby.”

¹⁵² Jenkins, interview with author.

could be exploited and fuelled by hostile and revisionist forces. Simultaneously, there was a recognition that state “coercion only goes so far, and people are only prepared to take so much.”¹⁵³ In short, Saudi Arabia saw governments as responsible for gradually changing the status quo in their countries without losing control.

In Saudi Arabia’s conception, the stability of individual Arab states had “two indispensable roots:”¹⁵⁴ security and economic development. Strong state apparatuses needed to create secure domestic environments in which governments could enact socio-economic reforms that would keep populations satisfied and opposed to popular unrest.¹⁵⁵ This meant that states needed to exercise control over the public sphere, including by preventing violent terrorist attacks, but also, for example, by policing media outlets and social media platforms for any expressions of public dissent. Saudi Arabia had no detailed plan for what economic development should look like in countries across the region.¹⁵⁶ At home, the Kingdom focused on bolstering the welfare state and creating public sector jobs during the first half of the 2010s; and, since the launch of Vision 2030, on a wide-ranging socio-economic liberalisation programme aimed at reducing reliance on hydrocarbon exports and building a knowledge economy with a strengthened private sector supported by a large sovereign wealth fund (the Public Investment Fund).¹⁵⁷ This was a capital-intensive model reminiscent of those pursued by the smaller Gulf monarchies and hardly applicable in poorer, non-oil producing economies in the region. There was a vague notion that Saudi Arabia would support fellow Arab states with investments and “strategic aid packages,”¹⁵⁸ or mega-projects such as the

¹⁵³ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁵⁴ Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Saud, “Intervention and Mediation,” (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 8 December 2012), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2012-f58e/third-plenary-session-e53a/prince-abdulaziz-al-saud-d991> [accessed 4 June 2020].

¹⁵⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Hertog, interview with author; Jenkins, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; US Academic focusing on Saudi Arabia, phone interview with author, 22 November 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Hokayem, interview with author; Partrick, interview with author; Shiban, interview with author.

¹⁵⁷ Karen Elliott-House, “Profile of a Prince: Promise and Peril in Mohammed Bin Salman’s Vision 2030,” *Belfer Center Paper* (April 2019); Stephen Grand and Katherine Wolff, *Assessing Saudi Vision 2030: A 2020 Review* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2020); Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (London: William Collins, 2020); Ben Hubbard and Kate Kelly, “Saudi Arabia’s Grand Plan to Move Beyond Oil: Big Goals, Bigger Hurdles,” *The New York Times*, 25 October 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/world/middleeast/saudi-arabias-grand-plan-to-move-beyond-oil-big-goals-bigger-hurdles.html>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

¹⁵⁸ Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech, HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal.” (speech, 12th Middle East Conference, London Business School, London, 30 May 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJrcWxE7VRU> [accessed 18 May 2020].

planned high-tech city Neom on the border with Jordan and Egypt.¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, however, each government had to find its own path, in Riyadh's view. In fact, there was a sense that Saudi Arabia has become regressively less willing to disperse substantial economic support to other Arab governments during the 2010s. At the beginning of the decade, it led GCC initiatives to bolster Jordan and Morocco's economies,¹⁶⁰ and it provided billions of dollars to Egypt after the overthrow of President Morsi in 2013.¹⁶¹ As time went on, however, it appeared to become less generous and more vocally sceptical of how effective and sustainable its long-practised cheque-book diplomacy in the region was — in terms of improving recipients' economies and in ensuring their governments' support for Saudi regional interests. According to one commentator, the "feeling that Saudi Arabia was not getting a commensurate return" for its economic support to Lebanon, Jordan or Egypt, for example, "is something that has been building over the years"¹⁶² amongst both the Kingdom's leadership and population.

7. 3. 2. Political Reform

Saudi Arabia was insistent that any form of political liberalisation, if needed at all, could only occur without compromising stability under the right economic conditions. From its perspective, "if you don't have a stable economy, it is impossible to have a stable political system."¹⁶³ Saudi Arabia therefore rejected the notion that sustainable economic development required prior or simultaneous political liberalisation, which has been a mainstay of western liberalisation agendas.¹⁶⁴ Instead, it identified China as a more applicable role model for itself and the MENA as a whole. Khalid bin Bandar explained: "Compare China and Russia: Russia tried political change and it collapsed after

¹⁵⁹ Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests," interview by Stephanie Flanders et al., *Bloomberg*, 5 October 2018, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-05/saudi-crown-prince-discusses-trump-aramco-arrests-transcript> [accessed 12 May 2020]; Jacob Wirtschater, "Egypt and Jordan Look to Reap Benefits from Planned Saudi Mega City," *The National*, 25 October 2017, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/egypt-and-jordan-look-to-reap-benefits-from-planned-saudi-mega-city-1.670309>. [accessed 6 June 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: Althari, interview with author.

¹⁶⁰ Al-Tamamy, "GCC Membership Expansion"; Guido Steinberg, "Anführer der Gegenrevolution: Saudi Arabien und der Arabische Frühling," (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2014).

¹⁶¹ Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia's Relations with Egypt," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Neil Partrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 55-74.

¹⁶² Shihabi, phone interview with author.

¹⁶³ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁶⁴ See for example: Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, eds., *Unchartered Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); Joel Peters, ed., *Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

the fall of the Soviet Union. The Chinese saw that and said: ‘no, no, no, we are going to do economic change.’”¹⁶⁵ From the perspective of the Saudi government, the promise of China’s model — that “you can be modern, you can be rich, you can be developed [...] and have no political participation whatsoever”¹⁶⁶ — was attractive intellectually. Moreover, this sequencing of economic and political change also made sense to Saudi Arabia based on what it had seen in the region over the past two decades. Cases such as Iraq after 2003, and Egypt, Libya or Yemen after 2011, led the Saudi government to conclude that political openings were simply too dangerous at a time when socio-economic grievances remained widespread. In the absence of strong political leadership, these were inevitably capitalised upon by destabilising domestic elements, including violent and non-violent Islamist groups, and manipulated by external agitators such as Iran, Turkey or Qatar. Instead, Saudi Arabia saw the path to stability in first implementing economic and social reforms — as one analyst put it, at least providing “bread and games”¹⁶⁷ — and thereby giving populations “something to lose [and] less likely to want dramatic change. They will want to work with the establishment that is there”¹⁶⁸ rather than call for political revolutions.

Nevertheless, while Saudi Arabia was sceptical of political liberalisation, it saw a need for Arab governments to make changes at the political level and ensure that they were more responsive to the concerns of their people. This went beyond addressing socio-economic grievances and extended to finding ways to strengthen governments’ popular legitimacy. Mohammed bin Salman assessed in 2016 that “any regime that did not represent its people collapsed in the Arab Spring,”¹⁶⁹ and, as noted above, Saudi Arabia saw a limit to the efficacy of coercion: “it doesn’t matter how great and powerful you are [...] if you don’t have buy-in [...] you are going to collapse.”¹⁷⁰ Saudi Arabia did not advocate for democracy, far from it — John Jenkins, British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 2012-2015 said that for the Kingdom’s leadership, “democratisation talk is *haki faadi*”¹⁷¹ (colloquial Arabic for ‘nonsense’). According to Khalid bin Bandar,

¹⁶⁵ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁶⁶ Former US Defence Official, interview with author.

¹⁶⁷ German Middle East Analyst, interview with author.

¹⁶⁸ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁶⁹ M. b. S. Al-Saud, “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad Bin Salman.”

¹⁷⁰ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁷¹ Jenkins, interview with author.

Saudi Arabia thought that elections should only be introduced under the right conditions, lest they give oxygen to groups committed to revolutionary change like those linked to Iran or the MB and its affiliates. This meant that these groups and the external influences supporting them need to be eliminated first; at the very least their popular appeal had to be weakened to such an extent that populations could be trusted to only vote for people who would work within the system. Khalid bin Bandar explained: “you need to have enough trust in them to make decisions before you are comfortable with them voting.” He also stressed that elections in which governments obviously manipulated the outcome were likely to be counter-productive: “when you tell your people that you’re a democratic state and you have elections, but you are not really, and everyone knows you’re not, you’ve already forfeited half of your legitimacy.”¹⁷² As discussed in Chapter 6, in Saudi Arabia’s narrative, the region’s monarchies, including the Kingdom itself, needed to be less concerned about their popular legitimacy, as they could rely on “tribal loyalties, family loyalties, blood loyalties.” Nevertheless, the Saudi government also sought to strengthen its relationship with its people, partly through carefully controlled and calibrated elections, but, most of all, through promoting Saudi nationalism. With the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, in particular, this reached unprecedented levels and was increasingly constructed around a cult of personality surrounding the young prince.¹⁷³ The Kingdom’s media outlets and alleged Saudi-sponsored social media campaigns sought to promote similar personality-centred nationalist sentiments in other countries, for example in support of Egypt’s President Al-Sisi, and Khalifa Haftar in Libya.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁷³ Discussed in interviews with: German Middle East Analyst, interview with author; Thomas Richter (Senior Research Fellow, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018; Karen Young, interview with author. See also: Eman Alhussein, “Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia,” *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019); Madawi Al-Rasheed, “The New Populist Nationalism in Saudi Arabia: Imagined Utopia by Royal Decree,” *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 5 May 2020, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/05/05/the-new-populist-nationalism-in-saudi-arabia-imagined-utopia-by-royal-decree/>. [accessed 18 May 2020].

¹⁷⁴ These campaigns tend to be non-attributable, but their content suggests at least alignment with Saudi interests. See for example: Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior in UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia,” *Facebook*, August 2019, available at: https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/cib-uae-egypt-saudi-arabia/amp/?__twitter_impression=true. [accessed 5 June 2020]; Declan Walsh and Nada Rashwan, “‘We’re at War’: A Covert Social Media Campaign Boosts Military Rulers,” *The New York Times*, 6 September 2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/world/middleeast/sudan-social-media.html>. [accessed 5 June 2020].

7. 3. 3. Islamism

The experience of the 2010s, particularly the brief reign of the MB in Egypt from 2012-2013 and Daesh's spectacular, albeit short-lived, establishment of a proto-state in the region, hardened Saudi Arabia's perception of political Islam as a threat to stability in the MENA. Riyadh clearly understood jihadist groups like Daesh and AQ as major threats to its own security and the stability of the region.¹⁷⁵ But it also considered dealing with them as relatively straightforward, including through military force and by dealing with "the two elephants in the room,"¹⁷⁶ the violent and sectarian practices of the Al-Assad regime in Syria and parts of the Iraqi government, both of which it viewed as beholden to Iran. Ultimately, according to Khalid bin Bandar, these jihadist groups "are shooting stars, [...] they burn hot, they make a lot of noise, do a lot of damage, but I don't see that they have a credible political future."¹⁷⁷ However, Saudi Arabia considered the MB's brand of political Islam a more complicated challenge — "It is easy to see the guys who are blowing things up; it is difficult to see the guys who are blowing up minds, and that is what we are dealing with."¹⁷⁸

Given the historically close relationship between the political leadership and the clerical establishment in the Kingdom itself, Saudi Arabia's views about the role Islam could play in the politics of stable Arab states were complex. Since the royal succession in 2015, the government severely curbed the influence of religious conservatives in Saudi Arabia and implemented liberalising social reforms.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, it also continued to see religion as a powerful cultural force that could be politically — and geopolitically — useful but had to be controlled by, and subservient to, the state and its leadership. According to Khalid bin Bandar, this view of the relationship between government and religion was illustrated by the design of the Saudi flag: "it is the institution of the government — it is the sword — holding up religion, not the other way

¹⁷⁵ Mohammed bin Nawaf Al-Saud, "Saudi Arabia Is No Supporter of Terror; Accusations Against My Country Are Wide of the Mark," *The Times*, 2 December 2015; Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, "Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal," (speech, 23rd Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 28 October 2014), available at <https://ncusar.org/programs/14-transcripts/2014-10-28-prince-turki-keynote.pdf> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁷⁶ Adel Al-Jubeir, "Statement by Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir," (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 12 February 2016), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2016/video/statements-by-mohammad-ashraf-ghani-haider-al-abadi-and-adel-bin-ahmed-al-jubeir/filter/video/> [accessed 12 May 2020].

¹⁷⁷ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Gregory Gause, "Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & Co, 2018) 31-43; Hubbard, *MBS*.

around.”¹⁸⁰ The Salafi doctrine of *wali al-amr*, which stipulates strict loyalty to a political, rather than religious leader, remained at the heart of Saudi Arabia’s idea for how politics and religion could relate to one another in the interest of stability.¹⁸¹ It formed the foundation of the concept of “moderate Islam” Riyadh sought to publicly advance at home and promote abroad.¹⁸²

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, this stood in sharp contrast to the MB’s political Islam, which it saw as advocating revolutionary change and promoting revisionist transnationalism that threatened the region’s status quo state system and “could help organise Saudi opposition.”¹⁸³ Mohammed bin Salman denounced the MB in particularly strident terms; he vowed that its influence in the Kingdom would be “eradicated completely.”¹⁸⁴ During the 2010s, Saudi officials such as Foreign Minister Al-Jubeir also increasingly described the MB as the origin of violent jihadist groups in the region: “the Muslim Brotherhood, we have to keep in mind, is what begot us [...] Al-Qaeda.” Saudi Arabia’s designation of the MB as a terrorist organisation in 2014 was justified in this way, but it also had to be understood within the context of a tendency to tie activism in opposition to the government to the crime of terrorism.¹⁸⁵ However, Saudi Arabia’s rejection of the MB was not absolute. It took a much more conciliatory to the involvement of MB affiliates or other Islamist groups in countries where they either had little prospect of seizing control of ultimate state power, as in Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait or Morocco, or were pursuing objectives that aligned with Riyadh’s, as in the case with Al-Islah in Yemen.¹⁸⁶ Ultimately, therefore “for Saudi Arabia it is about which Muslim Brother is useful and which isn’t.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁰ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁸¹ See for example: John Jenkins, “The Chatham House Version Revisited,” (*Elie and Sylvia Kedourie Lecture*, London: Policy Exchange, 2017); Stephane Lacroix, Bernard Haykel and Thomas Hegghammer, eds., *Saudi Arabia in Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Preuschaft, “Islam and Identity in Foreign Policy.”

¹⁸² Eman Alhusein, “Saudi Arabia Champions ‘Moderate Islam,’ Underpinning Reform Efforts,” *Issue Paper 10* (Washington DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2020).

¹⁸³ Shihabi, phone interview with author.

¹⁸⁴ Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, “Saudi Arabia's Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes,” interview by Norah O'Donnell, *CBS 60 Minutes*, 19 March 2018, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-talks-to-60-minutes/> [accessed 13 May 2020].

¹⁸⁵ The referral of Loujain Al-Hathloul, a prominent women’s rights activist, to a terrorism court was an illustrative example of this: Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Activist Who Fought for Women’s Right to Drive Is Sent to Terrorism Court,” *The New York Times*, 25 November 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/25/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-loujain-al-hathloul.html>. [accessed 30 November 2020].

¹⁸⁶ Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, “The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017), 129-53. Also discussed in interview with: UK-based Academic (B), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019.

¹⁸⁷ German Middle East Analyst, interview with author.

In sum, stability at the state level, in Saudi Arabia's conception, meant states that were strong enough to keep control over the public sphere, including by keeping in check any potentially destabilising groups such as those affiliated with the MB. It required governments that could implement gradual reform, especially to advance economic development, and ensure they had enough popular legitimacy to stave off revolutionary movements. Throughout, it was also clear that Saudi Arabia wanted Arab states to be run by governments that were reliable — as supporters of Riyadh's regional agenda vis-a-vis Iran and Turkey, but also, and more importantly, in terms of their own longevity. In the words of one Saudi diplomat: "if you don't know how long a government is going to last, how are you going to plan anything?"¹⁸⁸

7. 4. Conclusion

During the 2010s, Saudi Arabia saw instability spread and deepen across the MENA, with deleterious consequences for its national security and regional interests. In this environment, the Kingdom's leadership — first under the late King Abdullah, since 2015 under King Salman and driven by the more outwardly ambitious Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — resolved that to preserve its power it had to make changes at home and "bring stability to the region."¹⁸⁹ What exactly this meant, however, was less clearly communicated. As one analyst put it, "the Saudis don't have a grand holistic theory of the change that is happening in the region — or at least they don't broadcast it."¹⁹⁰ The analysis in this chapter nevertheless establishes some of the key aspects of Saudi Arabia's conception of stability in the MENA.

In general, Saudi Arabia saw stability as requiring a combination of preserving and rebuilding some aspects of the existing systems of order in the region, and controlling necessary changes to others. It clearly did not see stability in stagnation; at the level of individual states, in particular, it placed much emphasis on the need for governments to lead evolutionary — not revolutionary — change, including in the Kingdom itself. It saw stability as tied to economic development, but also to strong states and governments capable of maintaining both a degree of popular legitimacy and control over the public sphere, and

¹⁸⁸ Althari, interview with author.

¹⁸⁹ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁹⁰ Hokayem, interview with author.

keeping challenges from Islamists or other agitators for revolutionary political change at bay. Its conception of state-level stability therefore involved several of the components outlined in Chapter 2: an absence of violence, an accepted social contract between governments and their populations, and an ability to manage change while preserving as much political continuity as possible, at least in states Saudi Arabia considered on its side (rather than already compromised by Iranian or other nefarious influences). In that sense, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, "stability in the Middle East is continuity — regime continuity."¹⁹¹

With regard to regional order, Saudi Arabia saw the preservation of the region's status quo state system and the cementing of its own position therein as a natural regional leader (at least of the Arab portion of the MENA) as the basic condition for stability. However, given the Kingdom's negative perception of the state of the regional environment at the end of the 2010s, this actually required significant changes. Specifically, stability required not just containing, but reversing what Saudi Arabia perceived as a severe power imbalance vis-a-vis Iran and Turkey, both of which it regarded as pursuing hegemonic and transnational political projects undermining the sovereignty of Arab states — Iran by using sectarian Shia proxies, Turkey by supporting MB-style political Islam together with Qatar. In the context of the various theoretical models of regional order reviewed in Chapter 2, Saudi Arabia was therefore almost exclusively occupied with balance-of-power dynamics, rather than notions of a more intricate institutionalised or cooperative regional security architecture, at least when it came to dealing with the region's non-Arab powers. With regard to the organisation of inter-Arab affairs, Saudi Arabia also professed its commitment to norms of state sovereignty and non-interference, but clearly considered a region-wide acceptance of its natural claim to Arab leadership essential to stability. It essentially wanted a hegemonic order as outlined by Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll,¹⁹² but ideally one in which it did not have to exert much effort to force other Arab governments to fall in line — in short, it wanted

¹⁹¹ Former British Diplomat, phone interview with author.

¹⁹² Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), 731-753.

Arab states to “speak with one voice insofar as that there are no developments that go against the interests of Saudi Arabia.”¹⁹³

Finally, to even have a chance at attaining a degree of regional stability, Saudi Arabia considered the involvement of external powers, first and foremost the USA, in the MENA’s regional security architecture as indispensable. It gradually came to terms with the notion of a permanently reduced level of US engagement in the region, but still sought more or less unconditional American support for its regional agenda. At the same time, it has also regarded Russia and China as increasingly valuable partners in enabling stability in the region. This was based particularly on Saudi Arabia’s perception of Moscow and Beijing as pragmatic and reliable strategic actors whose basic objectives in the region and wider political views — e.g. their dislike for revolutionary regime change — could be brought into alignment with its own.

According to Saudi leaders, the Kingdom stood for “positive stability”¹⁹⁴ and a “vision of light”¹⁹⁵ for the region. In actuality, however, Saudi Arabia’s conception of stability in the MENA had less to do with plans to transform the region. Instead, it involved countering and rectifying various regional developments and trends it perceived as threatening its security and interests, including by protecting aspects of the status quo and rebuilding, strengthening and newly constructing systems of order — however ad-hoc — the Kingdom felt comfortable in.

¹⁹³ Fürtig, interview with author.

¹⁹⁴ K. b. B. Al-Saud, interview with author.

¹⁹⁵ Al-Jubeir, “Finding a New Equilibrium.”

8. The UAE's Perception of the Strategic Environment

The Opening of Pandora's Box

Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the UAE's most powerful decision-maker, described the MENA of the 2010s as "fraught with danger and threats to the national security of regional countries and to Arab security in general;"¹ and in this environment, the UAE had to assert itself, including with military force, to deter "those who dare to think of causing it harm."² According to Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the UAE positioned itself on the side of "those who pursue peace, development, modernity and the future," determined to face down "those who choose darkness, destruction, sabotage and chaos."³

This chapter analyses the UAE's perception of the strategic environment it encountered in the MENA during the 2010s. It argues that the UAE experienced the decade as a period of regional turmoil in which many serious threats to its national security and regional interests arose, but also as an affirmation of its own political and socio-economic governance model and an opportunity to expand its regional reach. The chapter assesses that the UAE viewed the Arab Uprisings as cataclysmic events that revealed the fragility of many Arab states and failures of their governments, as well as the changes underway in the international system that meant that the USA would no longer guarantee a modicum security in the MENA. As the decade progressed, the UAE saw the region's status quo state system and its own development model threatened by an array of destabilising extremist forces, comprising of both Islamist non-state actors and their state-backers, namely Iran, Turkey and Qatar. In this environment, the UAE felt it necessary to adopt an assertive foreign policy to defend its interests, but also considered itself a regional power capable of

¹ Mohammed bin Zayed A-Nahyan, "Speech of Mohamed bin Zayed," speech, 40th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification, Abu Dhabi, 5 May 2016), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=16 [accessed 15 June 2020].

² Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Speech of Mohamed bin Zayed," (speech, 39th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification, Abu Dhabi, 4 May 2015), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=15 [accessed 15 June 2020].

³ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Statement by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates," (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 22 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

setting an example for other Arab states and leading the promotion of a regional order suited to its strengths and convictions.

8. 1. The Big Picture Narrative

In the UAE's big-picture narrative of the strategic environment in the MENA, the 2010s were depicted as a period of historic, profound and dangerous instability. According to Anwar Gargash, then-Minister of State for Foreign Affairs,⁴ "even by the standards of the Middle East, these are exceptional and difficult times."⁵ The region that had "been used to three crises at one time, is now undergoing six, seven crises at the same time."⁶ Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla described the MENA as "a region that is full of extremists, full of violence, [...] that was unstable and is becoming even more unstable by the day,"⁷ — this, he said, was the "environment that we live in."⁸

The central notion of this Emirati narrative was that the perennially fragile, but nevertheless long-established regional order organised around sovereign Arab nation states was pushed to the brink of collapse in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. The "lack of opportunity, corruption and the failings of authoritarian regimes"⁹ had led to revolutions resulting in the disintegration of several Arab states. The UAE had prevailed thanks to its unique and successful development model that set it apart from its neighbours. Meanwhile, the international system was becoming "more fluid and more dynamic,"¹⁰ and the USA, in particular, was going through "a strategic reassessment"¹¹ of its role in the region and the world. As a result, a "lethal Pandora's box of contradictions and disorder"¹² had

⁴ Gargash left the Foreign Ministry February 2021 and became a special advisor to the UAE's Presidency. See: Rory Reynolds, "Gargash Leaves UAE Foreign Ministry for New Role after Cabinet Reshuffle," *The National*, 10 February 2021, available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/gargash-leaves-uae-foreign-ministry-for-new-role-after-cabinet-reshuffle-1.1163517>. [accessed 12 February 2021].

⁵ Anwar Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (speech, 3rd Annual Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 13 November 2016), available at: <https://epc.ae/storage/events/speeches/7KflkUs2ShRT0xOUH9gSBvMcsZu0hBPR1tsoFlih.pdf> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁶ Anwar Gargash, "In Conversation with Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash," interview by Sunjoy Joshi and Harsh Pant, *ORF*, 21 March 2018, available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/conversation-dr-anwar-mohammed-gargash-cabinet-minister-minister-state-foreign-affairs-uae-strategic-relations-india-uae-crisis-middle-east/> [accessed 15 March 2019].

⁷ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla (Professor Emeritus, UAE), interview with author, 23 July 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Anwar Gargash, "Let the Record Show: The UAE Stays True to National Goals," *The National*, 16 September 2012, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/let-the-record-show-the-uae-stays-true-to-national-goals-1.357834>. [accessed 15 March 2015]

¹⁰ Gargash, "In Conversation."

¹¹ Ebtessam Al Ketbi (President, Emirates Policy Center), phone interview with author, 13 July 2020.

¹² Anwar Gargash, "Keynote Speech" (speech, 2nd Annual Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 1 November 2015), available at: <https://epc.ae/storage/events/speeches/jjSn0wZgXuprArFonBocbCqllbslkjorD9VvFanO.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2021].

been opened in the region. The instability was fuelled and exploited by two axes of extremist forces pursuing only marginally different ideology-driven, backwards and revisionist transnational political projects in the region: Iran and its network of extremist Shia non-state actors; and a cabal of Sunni extremists comprising AQ and Daesh, the MB and its affiliates, and their state sponsors Turkey and Qatar.

Throughout the decade, the UAE presented itself as “a haven of stability,”¹³ and in the words of Yousef Al-Otaiba, Ambassador to the USA, “a regional model for openness and tolerance”¹⁴ with a modern multi-national and multi-religious society. Thanks to a “wise leadership,”¹⁵ dedicated to building a thriving economy and delivering rising living standards for its citizens, the UAE had “been less affected by the Arab Spring.”¹⁶ This characterisation of the UAE’s leaders, and especially Mohammed bin Zayed and Dubai’s ruler Mohammed bin Rashid, as far-sighted visionaries and shrewd strategists, was a cornerstone of the Emirati narrative.¹⁷ In fact, in 2017, Mohammed bin Rashid himself claimed that he had identified many of the socio-economic and political problems that led to the Arab Uprisings long before 2011; he said he had warned fellow Arab leaders in the early 2000s that they needed to “change or be changed.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, the UAE saw itself directly affected by the turmoil in the region. Domestically, a small but insidious Islamist opposition, the MB-affiliate Al-Islah, “had been emboldened” by the strengthening of Islamist forces elsewhere, especially in Egypt, “and posed a threat to the country’s national cohesion.”¹⁹ To contain and counter this and other threats to its national security and regional interests, the UAE had adopted a more assertive foreign policy. According to

¹³ Anwar Gargash, “United Arab Emirates: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Anwar Bin Mohammed Gargash,” (speech, Asia Society, New York, 26 September 2018), available at: <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/events/united-arab-emirates-minister-state-foreign-affairs-dr-anwar-bin-mohammed-gargash> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁴ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Remarks by Ambassador Yousef Al-Otaiba,” (speech, UAE National Day Reception, Washington DC, 2 December 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a2ODxWb59A> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁵ Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement by His Highness General Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan,” (speech, 42nd Anniversary of the UAE National Day, Abu Dhabi, 1 December 2013), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=11 [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁶ Anwar Gargash, “Amid Challenges, UAE Policies Engage Gradual Reforms,” *The National*, 26 August 2019, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/amid-challenges-uae-policies-engage-gradual-reforms-1.409084>. [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁷ Emirati Academic (B), phone interview with author, 9 April 2020.

¹⁸ Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, “How to Reignite the Region’s Development,” (speech, World Government Summit, Abu Dhabi, 12 February 2017), available at: <https://www.worldgovernmentsummit.org/annual-gathering/2017/sessions/how-to-reignite-the-region-s-development> [15 June 2020].

¹⁹ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

Gargash, “we have refused to idly stand by as the region around us has been set ablaze.”²⁰ Employing variations on the same metaphor, Emirati officials and commentators have repeatedly explained that the UAE could be secure, while its neighbourhood was “burning,”²¹ being “burgled” or otherwise undermined.²² “If you are not concerned you are a fool,” said Abdulla, “if we sit like a duck, one day this danger and instability is going to come to us.”²³

Moreover, UAE felt a “responsibility towards the security of our sisterly Arab nations.”²⁴ It presented itself as a dynamic, effective and reliable regional partner to its friends in the region and beyond, but also as confident in its capabilities and the righteousness of its cause. Omar Saif Ghobash, a leading Emirati diplomat, for example, told an audience in London in 2017: “I get a little bit sensitive about the idea of [the UAE] being emboldened and being given permission. We actually do have our own strategic interests that may differ from the United States [and] Western Europe.”²⁵ The UAE staunchly rejected suggestions that it was seeking a regional leadership role, persistently emphasising its close cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Egypt as the Arab world’s central powers.²⁶ But it certainly embraced the notion of the UAE as the region’s beacon of modernity, lighting the way “towards a future that is brighter and full of hope.”²⁷

The UAE’s big-picture narrative described instability in the MENA during the 2010s as the result of a confluence of global and regional factors. The region’s own tribulations were both enabled by, and taking place within, a wider context of uncertainty and transition at the global level. According to Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, President of the Emirates Policy Center, “you cannot separate what is happening in the region [...] from what is happening in the international

²⁰ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

²¹ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

²² Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

²³ Abdulla, interview with author.

²⁴ M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Speech,” (39th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification).

²⁵ Omar Saif Ghobash, “Geopolitics: Ideology and Fragmentation in the Middle East,” (speech, Margaret Thatcher Conference on Security, Centre for Policy Studies, London, 27 June 2017), available at: <http://www.cps.org.uk/security2017/> [accessed 15 June 2020].

²⁶ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2 October 2015), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/70/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020]; Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 29 September 2018), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/73/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020]; Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (3rd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

²⁷ A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Statement,” (72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

system.”²⁸ Since the turn of the century, and with the passing of milestones, such as the global financial crisis, the unipolar, US-centric international system had transformed into “a dynamic one.”²⁹ Crucially, the USA’s position in the MENA was changing. The Obama administration, in particular, pursued a regional agenda at odds with the UAE’s interests, “supporting Arab revolutions,”³⁰ and engaging with Iran and signing the JCPOA over the objections of its traditional partners in the region whom Obama “described as free riders.”³¹ According to Abdulla, “the UAE have seen the Obama eight years as a disaster.”³² The UAE had a more favourable view of the Trump administration’s approach to the region.³³ But it concluded that, regardless of who was occupying the presidency, the US was rebalancing away from the MENA and towards growing geopolitical competition with other global powers such as Russia and China, thereby contributing to an emerging “strategic vacuum in the structure of the Arab world.”³⁴

The regional order was further affected by the decline or outright collapse of the MENA’s traditional power centres Iraq, Egypt and Syria. Misguided US policy had played a role in the demise of all three: The US-invasion of Iraq in 2003 “was the start of the shakeup”³⁵ in the region, followed by Washington’s decision to call on Egypt’s Mubarak to step down in 2011³⁶ and its refusal to intervene to prevent Syria’s descent into civil war in the early 2010s.³⁷ But the Emirati narrative did not exclusively blame the USA for the disintegration of the established power structures in Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus and other Arab capitals. Instead, it also diagnosed “a structural and livelihood crisis”³⁸ in many

²⁸ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

²⁹ Gargash, “In Conversation.”

³⁰ Al-Maktoum, “How to Reignite.”

³¹ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

³² Abdulla, interview with author.

³³ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Qatar and the Middle East,” interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 26 July 2017, available at: <https://charlirose.com/videos/30799> [accessed 15 June 2020]; Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Gulf States Are Ready for Peaceful Coexistence - If Iran Is,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 2017, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-gulf-states-are-ready-for-peaceful-coexistenceif-iran-is-1488499030>. [accessed 15 June 2020].

³⁴ Al Ketbi, interview with author. Also discussed in interview with: Abdulla, interview with author.

³⁵ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

³⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Albadr Alshateri (Adjunct Professor, UAE National Defence College), email interview with author, email, 17 April 2019; Expert on UAE Foreign Policy, interview with author, 25 March 2019.

³⁷ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 28 September 2013), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/68/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

³⁸ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

Arab countries, brought about by “poor governance”³⁹ and “developmental failures.”⁴⁰ “Failed governments”⁴¹ had left populations “devoid of order, economic opportunity or hope”⁴² and “fed up with collapsing standards of living.”⁴³ The ensuing revolutions, however, made matters worse, revealing deep societal divisions and widening the power vacuum both within individual states and at the regional level.⁴⁴

However, the main focus of the UAE's big-picture narrative has been on how instability across the region was fomented, exacerbated and exploited by a range of extremist non-state actors and their state sponsors. Central to this was an assertion that Iran and Turkey were unduly interfering in what the UAE described as an “essentially Arab Middle East.”⁴⁵ In 2013, Abdullah bin Zayed told the UN General Assembly that “the UAE recognises the suffering of the Arab region from the interference by others in its internal affairs and the ensuing threats to national statehood.”⁴⁶ While this statement likely primarily referred to Iran, as the decade progressed the Emirati narrative has increasingly focused on Turkey. Both Iran and Turkey were using “non-state actors to penetrate, to expand, to intervene in the region”⁴⁷ intending to undermine and weaken Arab nation states and attain hegemonic influence. Iran wanted “to dominate the region”⁴⁸ and was “funding, arming and enabling radical, violent and subversive cells”⁴⁹ in nearly “every country in the region.”⁵⁰ Tehran had sought to present itself as “the Vatican for the Shia world,”⁵¹ spreading “intense sectarianism”⁵² and demanding the loyalty of Shia Muslims across the region regardless of their

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Keynote Speech,” (speech, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, 29 December 2015), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCd8FtpJ89E> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Gargash, “United Arab Emirates: Minister of State.”

⁴⁴ Anwar Gargash “Keynote Speech,” (speech, 4th Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 12 November 2017), available at: <https://youtu.be/a4l8BBRJGlo> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁴⁵ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East: Hard Questions, Harder Answers,” (speech, The Octavian Report, Washington DC, 15 November 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kn46Af9ZfVM> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁴⁶ A.b. Z. Al-Nahyan, (68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

⁴⁷ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

⁴⁸ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Iran Nuclear Deal after 1 Year: The View from the UAE,” (speech, United Against a Nuclear Iran, New York, 28 September 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSakhhGx9XI> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁴⁹ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point,” (speech, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 29 January 2016), available at: <https://www.csis.org/events/middle-east-inflection-point> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Al-Otaiba, “The Iran Nuclear Deal after 1 Year.”

⁵² Al-Otaiba, “Qatar and the Middle East.”

citizenship. This had only gotten worse following the JCPOA, which the UAE described as having further emboldened Iran.⁵³ Moreover, Emirati leaders have also consistently highlighted Iran's ongoing occupation of three Emirati islands in the Gulf as illustrating a persistent Iranian threat to the security of international trade flows to and from the region.⁵⁴

However, the UAE arguably assigned even more blame for "the realities of chaos and violence" in the MENA to Sunni Islamist groups. Daesh was described as "a breakthrough for extremism"⁵⁵ and an "existential threat to the region."⁵⁶ Yet, a defining feature of the Emirati narrative was that it portrayed the activities of AQ and Daesh as only the most violent manifestations of a wider threat posed to regional stability by the MB and its interpretation of political Islam. Gargash and Al-Otaiba, respectively, described the Brotherhood's ideology as "the launching pad"⁵⁷ and "gateway drug to jihadism."⁵⁸ In fact, while the violent excesses of AQ and Daesh could be countered effectively by military means, the MB and its affiliates represented a more insidious challenge.⁵⁹ Under the guise of calls for political reform and participation in democratic processes, it was spreading intolerance and deepening societal divisions in Arab countries, while seeking to amass power across the region with no respect for national borders. Using other means, it was pursuing the same ultimate objective as AQ and Daesh, namely the establishment of totalitarian religious states, diametrically opposed to the UAE's cosmopolitan, tolerant and business-oriented political and societal model.⁶⁰ Turkey and Qatar were supporting these groups both politically and materially. Ankara was working to reclaim religious-political influence in the region inspired by the

⁵³ Al-Otaiba, "The Gulf States Are Ready."

⁵⁴ A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Statement," (72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly); Al-Otaiba, "The Middle East at an Inflection Point."

⁵⁵ Omar Saif Ghobash, "A Battle of Ideas against Terrorism," (speech, Knowledge at Wharton, Wharton, 26 September 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeK1qkhCEOg> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁵⁶ Al-Otaiba, "The Middle East at an Inflection Point."

⁵⁷ Yousef Al-Otaiba, "Qatar Cannot Have It Both Ways," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2017, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/qatar-cannot-have-it-both-ways-1497307260>. [15 June 2020].

⁵⁸ Anwar Gargash, "The UAE View of the Gcc Crisis: What Happened and What Happens Next?" (speech, Chatham House, London, 17 July 2017), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/gulf-crisis-why-it-happened-and-what-happens-next> [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁵⁹ Anwar Gargash, "Security Architecture in the Middle East: Building on Sand?" (speech, GlobSec 2019, Bratislava, 7 June 2019), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=Wosu0CPGDkc [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁶⁰ Anwar Gargash, "Qatar Must Be Stopped from Financing Terror," *The Times*, 8 June 2017, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatar-must-be-stopped-from-financing-terror-3gdd02xkm>. [accessed 16 June 2020]; Ghobash, "A Battle of Ideas."

legacy of the Ottoman Empire;⁶¹ Doha was “using its sponsorship of extremists as a tool of foreign policy.”⁶²

In general, the UAE has described Iran’s regional agenda and Sunni political Islam as two sides of the same coin, both seeking to upend the MENA’s state system and dragging the region backwards, away from the path of development and modernity. Their efforts had reached new heights in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings; according to Abdullah bin Zayed, “since the Second World War, the world has not witnessed such an escalation in brutal and shocking terrorist crimes carried out by extremist organisations, most notably Daesh, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Ansar-Allah [the Houthis], and other groups, who exploit religion for political purposes.”⁶³

In sum, the UAE’s big-picture narrative depicted the 2010s as a period of deep instability in the MENA, in which the very survival of the region was at stake. Global and regional power had become defuse; whereas the answer to crises in the region had once been “centred on two things: what is Washington thinking, and what are Cairo and Damascus thinking,” the landscape had become much more diverse, with “Moscow and Beijing” playing growing roles, and Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, as well as “Tehran, Ankara and Tel Aviv” having a major say.⁶⁴ Most importantly, however, the UAE’s narrative saw the region as divided into two main camps: The revolutionary fervour of the Arab Uprisings had opened “a Pandora’s box of contradictions”⁶⁵ in the region, with extremist non-state actors and their state sponsors Iran, Turkey and Qatar fanning the flames and exploiting instability for revisionist aims. Meanwhile, the UAE was part of a group of states determined to “seek the evolutionary change necessary to progress forward.”⁶⁶ It was working alongside Saudi Arabia, which had thankfully embraced “a far more pragmatic, non-ideological approach to problem solving,”⁶⁷ especially since the successions of King Salman and the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Egypt. The overthrow of the MB-led government in Cairo in 2013 had allowed the latter to reemerge “as a pivotal

⁶¹ Gargash, “In Conversation.” See also: Al-Khaleej Times, “UAE Asks Turkey to Stop Meddling in Arab Affairs,” 1 August 2020, available at: <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/dubai/uae-asks-turkey-to-stop-meddling-in-arab-affairs>. [accessed 4 August 2020].

⁶² Gargash, “Qatar Must Be Stopped.”

⁶³ A.b. Z. Al-Nahyan, (70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

⁶⁴ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

⁶⁵ Gargash, “United Arab Emirates: Minister of State.”

⁶⁶ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

⁶⁷ Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point.”

state whose stability and domestic peace indicates that the region has begun to recover.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, the UAE resolved that “the region rarely gets it right when it comes to political transitions and revolutions. More often than not, violent free-for-alls win out.”⁶⁹

8. 2. Drivers of Instability and Disorder

The Emirati narrative outlined above identifies a number of factors that the UAE regarded as having contributed to instability in the MENA during the 2010s (and before). This section deepens the analysis of the UAE’s perception of the strategic environment in the region by examining in greater depth what it considered to be the main drivers of instability. What emerges is an understanding of the UAE’s assessment of its environment that is more nuanced and complex than the narrative intended for public consumption. Nevertheless, the basic notion of the UAE seeing regional instability as the result of a confluence of factors at the state-, regional- and international level remains.

8. 2. 1. Failing Arab Governments

Throughout the 2010s, the UAE has openly identified the failures of Arab governments across the MENA as driving instability in the region.⁷⁰ Often presenting them as standing in sharp contrast to the performance of the UAE’s own administration,⁷¹ it considered many Arab governments as too corrupt and inept at managing their national economies, and lacking both the strength and popular legitimacy to adequately control their countries’ public spheres. Although generally refraining from singling out individuals — with the partial exception of Libya’s Gaddafi and Syria’s Al-Assad⁷² — the UAE assessed that many Arab leaders had allowed popular discontent to grow by not adequately

⁶⁸ A.b. Z. Al-Nahyan, (68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

⁶⁹ Anwar Gargash, “Our Solution for Libya,” *The National*, 19 May 2019, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/dr-anwar-gargash-our-solution-for-libya-1.863113>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁷⁰ The UAE has seen popular protests against governments in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon in 2018/19 as linked to many of the same political and socio-economic drivers as those during the Arab Uprisings. Discussed in interviews with: Alshateri, interview with author; Emirati Academic (A), phone interview with author, 27 June 2019; Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

⁷¹ Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, “Exclusive Interview,” interview by Jon Sopel, *BBC News*, 17 January 2014, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeDb2nU9jKU> [accessed 16 June 2020]; Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement by His Highness General Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan,” (speech, 43rd Anniversary of the UAE National Day, Abu Dhabi, 1 December 2014), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=14 [accessed 15 June 2020]; Saif bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Exceptional Leadership,” (speech, World Government Summit, Abu Dhabi, 9 February 2014), available at: <https://youtu.be/b4WWQf8y0x0> [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁷² See for example, Al-Maktoum, “Exclusive Interview”; Al-Maktoum, “How to Reignite.”

listening and responding to their populations' socio-economic development expectations.⁷³ It also judged that the rulers of several republics, including Mubarak in Egypt or Ben Ali in Tunisia, had further alienated public and elite sentiment through misguided attempts to monopolise power in their own families and away from national institutions, such as the military, that retained some historical legitimacy.⁷⁴ Yet, the UAE's enthusiastic public support for Saudi Arabia's socio-economic reform agenda since 2015, and indications of growing Emirati frustrations with the apparent inability of the Jordanian government, for example, to convert aid from the Gulf into sustainable economic development,⁷⁵ suggest that it also saw a need for improvements in some of the region's fellow monarchies.

Yet, the UAE's assessment of "the failings of authoritarian regimes"⁷⁶ in the region went beyond their socio-economic development records. It also considered many Arab governments as too weak and not vigilant enough with regard to the potentially destabilising activities of political agitators and opposition groups.⁷⁷ In its view, this included both those championing "liberal values that challenge the political conservative principles"⁷⁸ favoured by the UAE, and those linked to the MB.⁷⁹ It saw the mere presence of an organised opposition that could translate socio-economic discontent into popular demands to challenge not just the policies, but also the political structures of existing governments as a potential source of instability. From its perspective, calls for change of political systems that was not directed and controlled by state authorities were, in essence, an expression of extremism — independent of their ideological basis. The UAE's crackdown on all domestic expressions of political dissent, particularly from Islamists, in 2011 and thereafter,⁸⁰ and its support for similar practices in other Arab countries — whether by fellow GCC

⁷³ Al-Otaiba, "Keynote Speech"; Gargash, "Let the Record Show." Also discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Al Ketbi, interview with author.

⁷⁴ Emirati Academic (A), interview with author.

⁷⁵ Peter Millett (former British Ambassador to Jordan and Libya), phone interview with author, 25 November 2019.

⁷⁶ Gargash, "Let the Record Show."

⁷⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Chris Doyle (Director, Center for Arab British Understanding), interview with author, 29 March 2019; UAE-based Academic (A), phone interview with author, 8 April 2019; UK-based Middle East Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 5 April 2019.

⁷⁸ Mohamed Binhuwaidin (Associate Professor of Politics, UAE University), email interview with author, 3 July 2020.

⁷⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Giorgio Cafiero (CEO of Gulf State Analytics), phone interview with author, 4 December 2019; UK-based Political Risk Analyst, interview with author, 8 April 2019.

⁸⁰ The Emirati government's moves against all forms of domestic opposition are covered in detail in: Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

monarchies or Egypt's post-2013 government — can be understood in this context. Related to this, the UAE also considered modern media and mass communication technologies, especially satellite television and social media, as potential enablers of, and tools for fomenting, instability, including across national borders. Its efforts to censor and influence public debate in both conventional and social media spheres across the region,⁸¹ and its vociferous denunciations of Qatar's *Al-Jazeera* as a promotor of extremism⁸² illustrated this.

Ultimately, in the UAE's perception, Arab governments were at least partially at fault for the instability of the 2010s. Their economic and political mismanagement, and their neglect of, and/or inability to manage the public sphere, had created the conditions in which uncontrolled popular mobilisation could occur. Whether in the form of revolutionary mass-movements, or as elections that revolutionary change agents could win (from the UAE's perspective democracy had proven to be divisive, particularly "when it is coupled with Islamism"⁸³), the result was space various nefarious actors (discussed further below) could exploit.

8. 2. 2. Shifting Global Balance of Power and US Retrenchment

The UAE saw changes in the international environment and the actions — and often, inactions — of global powers as driving, or at least enabling or amplifying instability in the MENA. For example, it regarded the economic crises of many countries in the region as related to the fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis;⁸⁴ and the ability of protest movements and non-state actors to use social media to mobilise and spread ideas as a consequence of technological

⁸¹ See for example: Sandhya D'Mello, "Social Media to Be Monitored in UAE, Strict Norms Implemented," *Khaleej Times*, 3 September 2019, available at: <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/government/social-media-to-be-monitored-strict-norms-implemented-> [accessed 16 June 2020]; Jon Hoffman, "'Bots' and Bans: Social Media and Regime Propaganda in the Middle East," *OpenDemocracy*, 12 March 2020, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/bots-and-bans-social-media-and-regime-propaganda-in-the-middle-east/> [accessed 16 June 2020]; Declan Walsh and Nada Rashwan, "'We're at War': A Covert Social Media Campaign Boosts Military Rulers," *The New York Times*, 6 September 2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/world/middleeast/sudan-social-media.html> [accessed 5 June 2020].

⁸² Al-Otaiba, "Qatar Cannot Have It Both Ways"; Ghobash, "Geopolitics."

⁸³ Omar Saif Ghobash, "Islam and Democracy: A Vision to Lead Us from Violence," (speech, Wharton SEI Center Distinguished Lecture, Wharton, 24 October 2014), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rr_ATwgP3Zg [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁸⁴ James Worrall (Associate Professor, Leeds University), phone interview with the author, 15 April 2019.

innovations changing politics around the world.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the UAE saw, ongoing shifts in the global balance of power, which it was itself acutely aware of as Asian countries increasingly became its most important economic partners,⁸⁶ were also affecting the MENA. It had long regarded the international community writ-large, and its leading powers represented in the UN Security Council, as having failed to resolve, rather than just manage, many of the region's conflicts and crises (the Arab-Israeli conflict being a frequently cited example).⁸⁷ It saw the stalemate in the Security Council over the war in Syria as the latest example of how the international community was allowing conflicts in the region to fester leading to the multiplication of "the complexities that are coupled with such crises."⁸⁸ In another example, it regarded the international attempt to curb Iran's nuclear programme through the JCPOA as a testament to the international community's lack of understanding of security dynamics in the MENA. In the UAE's view, by focusing solely on the nuclear file, the agreement only served to embolden Tehran's destabilising regional behaviour.⁸⁹

However, for the UAE, the most important international driver of instability in the MENA was the USA's approach to the region, both before, and especially during the 2010s. In 2012, then police chief in Dubai Dahi Khalfan Tamim controversially argued that "US policy in the region is the number one security threat."⁹⁰ In his view, Washington had "realised all the dreams of Iran" by toppling Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003 and endorsing the Arab Uprisings. This sweeping assessment may not have been shared in full by the wider Emirati leadership, which continued to regard the USA as a critically important partner. Nevertheless, they shared a growing perception of

⁸⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Jonathan Fulton (Assistant Professor, Zayed University, UAE), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Baker Institute Fellow, Rice University), phone interview with author, 1 April 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), phone interview with author, 17 May 2019.

⁸⁶ Abdulla, interview with author; Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; UAE-based Political Analyst (B), phone interview with author, 8 July 2020. See also: Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

⁸⁷ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates," (speech, General Debate of the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2016), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/71/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "The World Must Choose: Peace and Prosperity, or Iran's Clenched Fist," *The Australian*, 9 May 2018; Gargash, "United Arab Emirates: Minister of State." Also discussed in interview with: Al Ketbi, interview with author

⁹⁰ Dahi Khalfan Tamim, "Dubai Police Chief Dahi Khalfan Tamim: 'U.S. Policy Is the No. 1 Security Threat' to the Gulf States; America Has 'Realized the Dreams of Iran' in Iraq, 'Is Now Embracing' the Muslim Brotherhood, and 'Is No Longer an Ally'." *MEMRI*, 31 January 2012, available at: <https://www.memri.org/reports/dubai-police-chief-dahi-khalfan-tamim-us-policy-no-1-security-threat-gulf-states-america-has>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

disillusionment regarding the USA's general reliability as a guarantor of the UAE's national security and the regional order. According to one UAE-based academic, there was a sense that "while the West is our most important ally, it never listens to us."⁹¹ The UAE had strongly opposed the 2003 Iraq war, and during the 2010s saw the Obama administration, in particular, make decisions it considered not just contrary to its interests, but harmful to regional stability. This included Obama's call for Egypt's Mubarak to step down and subsequent readiness to work with a MB-run government in Cairo, and Washington's rapprochement with Tehran. The UAE also perceived Obama's description of the Gulf states as security "free riders"⁹² as an affront given its participation in US-led military operations around the world since the early 1990s.⁹³ The UAE had a more favourable view of the Trump administration, particularly with regard to its hawkish Iran policy, and outspoken support for UAE-aligned governments in the region such as those in Cairo and Riyadh.⁹⁴ But it also continued to regard the USA as regressively less willing to maintain security in the region. Moreover, the UAE worried about Washington's unpredictability,⁹⁵ demonstrated in what it considered to be both under- and over-reactions to Iranian activities in the Gulf and the wider region — with the lack of a US response to the attacks on Saudi oil installations in September 2019,⁹⁶ and the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020⁹⁷ serving as the most obvious examples, respectively.

⁹¹ Janardhan, interview with author.

⁹² Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> [accessed 15 September 2019].

⁹³ The UAE has participated in several US/NATO-led military operations over the decades, including Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya; for more detail see: Hussein Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy* (Washington DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2017). Emirati leaders have often highlighted this record of cooperation, see for example: Yousef Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation with His Excellency Yousef Al Otaiba, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States," (speech, RAND Events, Washington DC, 1 June 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDWVqvHbONQ> [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁹⁴ Al-Otaiba, "Qatar and the Middle East"; Al-Otaiba, "The Gulf States Are Ready."

⁹⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Al Ketbi, interview with author; Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 15 February 2019.

⁹⁶ The lack of a strong US response to the attack caused concerns in the UAE about the reliability of US commitments to its security; see for example: Sanam Vakil, "UAE-Iran Relations: Taking a Turn for the Better?" *Castlereagh*, 26 November 2019, available at: <https://castlereagh.net/uae-iran-relations-taking-a-turn-for-the-better/>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁹⁷ Emirati leaders called for calm after the assassination, fearing Iranian reprisals; see: Dona Cherian and Khitam Al-Amir, "Gen. Soleimani Killing in Iraq: UAE Calls for Wisdom to Avoid Confrontation," *Gulf News*, 3 January 2020, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/uae/gen-soleimani-killing-in-iraq-uae-calls-for-wisdom-to-avoid-confrontation-1.1578050326471>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

8. 2. 3. Islamist Non-State Actors

The UAE considered the weakness of various Arab states, changes in the international system, and the USA's inconsistent and unreliable policies as major sources and enablers of instability in the MENA during the 2010s. Yet, in its perception, the most important drivers of instability were a number of state- and non-state actors within the region itself, namely Iran and its network of Shia militias, and what it portrayed as a nexus of Turkey, Qatar, the MB and its affiliates, and jihadist groups like AQ and Daesh. The UAE considered the regional policies pursued by the governments in Tehran, Ankara and Doha as destabilising in their own specific ways, as is discussed below. However, what united them, from the UAE's perspective, was their support for Islamist non-state actors. According to one Emirati academic, for the UAE "non-state actors, and I would say especially transnational non-state actors, are the antithesis of the state."⁹⁸ Moreover, despite their sectarian and political differences, Shia militias like Hizbollah and the Houthis, jihadist groups such as AQ and Daesh, and the MB and its affiliates were, in the UAE's view, all pursuing variations of a "radical religious utopia"⁹⁹ irrespective of, and across existing state borders.¹⁰⁰ The UAE perceived these groups as not just hostile to the region's status quo state system, but also to its own specific political and socio-economic development model.

The UAE considered Hizbollah in Lebanon, various Shia political parties and militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen as systematically undermining the sovereignty of their host countries. It saw them as primarily loyal to the transnational Islamist ideology of the Islamic Republic and its Supreme Leader, rather than their respective nation states.¹⁰¹ The main focus of the UAE, however, has been on groups promoting Sunni interpretations of political Islam, which it perceived as having wider popular appeal in the Arab world, including, critically, in the UAE itself.

⁹⁸ Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

⁹⁹ A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "The World Must Choose."

¹⁰⁰ Yousef Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation with His Excellency Yousef Al Otaiba," (speech, John Goodwin Tower Center, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, 20 October 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98FRC9CNsTU> [accessed 16 June 2020]; Anwar Gargash, "Political and Military Responses to Extremism in the Middle East," (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 9 December 2017), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue-test/archive/manama-dialogue-2017-c364/plenary2-3454/dr-anwar-mohammad-gargash-ba8b> [accessed 16 June 2020].

¹⁰¹ Al-Otaiba, "The Iran Nuclear Deal after 1 Year"; Gargash, "United Arab Emirates: Minister of State." Also discussed in interview with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

The UAE saw the violence and state-building projects of AQ's regional affiliates and Daesh as obvious threats to regional security and stability. But it consistently argued that these groups could only be defeated once political Islam in general, and the MB in particular, was confronted as well. This intense hostility towards the MB has at least in part been attributed to the personal views of Mohammed bin Zayed, both in the literature¹⁰² and by former western officials interviewed for this thesis who have personally engaged with him during the 2010s. According to a senior American diplomat, Mohammed bin Zayed "looks at the Muslim Brotherhood as the heart of the problem for the Arab Middle East,"¹⁰³ and Lord Richards, former head of the British military, said that "Mohammed bin Zayed would tell you the Muslim Brotherhood is a malign organisation that is one step away from [AQ and Daesh]."¹⁰⁴

The Emirati government perceived the MB's political project as antithetical to its own domestic and regional agenda. According to Ghobash, one of the most prominent voices explaining the UAE's views of political Islam, "both [Daesh] and the Muslim Brotherhood are Islamist movements and fundamentally, I believe, hostile to the kind of Arab society that I want to see."¹⁰⁵ Even within its above described general antipathy towards organised and popularly-driven opposition movements, the UAE considered the MB, and any political groups linked to it, as particularly dangerous. It saw their message, couched in religious language and disseminated in mosques and other settings difficult to control by state authorities, as potentially attractive to large segments of religiously conservative societies across the region. Domestically, Emirati leaders, particularly in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, feared that Al-Islah, the local Brotherhood-affiliate, could mobilise populations of the poorer northern Emirates, thereby threatening the federation's national unity; calling for political reforms that were questioning the legitimacy of the UAE's monarchical system; and agitating for more conservative policies anathema to the liberal — albeit carefully controlled

¹⁰² For more detail see the literature review in Chapter 5. Various profiles of Mohammed bin Zayed discuss his personal dislike for the Muslim Brotherhood: David D. Kirckpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't MBS. It's MBZ," *The New York Times*, 2 June 2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/world/middleeast/crown-prince-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>. [accessed 12 February 2020]; Robert Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future," *The New York Times Magazine*, 9 January 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/magazine/united-arab-emirates-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>. [accessed 12 February 2020].

¹⁰³ Former Senior American Diplomat, phone interview with author, 16 May 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Lord David Richards of Herstmonceux (Former British Chief of Defence Staff), interview with author, 8 April 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Ghobash, "Islam and Democracy."

— social and business environment they considered to be the basis of the UAE’s success.¹⁰⁶ (The UAE’s self-perception is further discussed below.) In the words of Gargash, Al-Islah was calling for “shutting churches and temples, reversing women’s rights and introducing its own interpretation of Islamic law.”¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, the UAE considered the MB as fundamentally incapable of providing solutions to what it saw as the region’s socio-economic challenges. Ghobash explained this view in his book *Letters to a Young Muslim*.¹⁰⁸ By invoking Islam as the basis for all political decisions, Islamists were making ideological purity, rather than delivering workable solutions, the primary criteria for policy-making. Meanwhile, they were accusing anyone who disagreed with their political agenda of going against Islam itself. The inevitable “failure of political Islam”¹⁰⁹ would then spur the even more extreme approach of groups like AQ and Daesh. This might be a somewhat self-serving interpretation of political Islam, devised at least as much to justify the UAE’s approach to limit religious influence on policy-making, as to explain the problems of Islamism. However, various interviewees, including well-connected Emirati academics,¹¹⁰ western officials with experience of working with the Emirati government,¹¹¹ and a large number of subject-matter experts,¹¹² agreed that it was a genuine and important part of the UAE’s perception. Moreover, it is also clear that the UAE understood MB-style political Islam as inherently transnational and opposed to the concept of nation states. It assessed that Islamists would “never be satisfied to achieve an Islamic regime in one country”¹¹³ according to Emirati academic Albadr Alshateri. Once in power, or when furnished with safe space to operate

¹⁰⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Fulton, interview with author; John Jenkins (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 18, April 2019; UAE-based Academic (B), phone interview with author, 26 June 2019; UAE-based Political Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 28 August 2018; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author, 27 February 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (D), phone interview with author, 25 November 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Anwar Gargash, “Don’t Stereotype the UAE: We Believe in Tolerance Too,” *The Times*, 7 November 2012, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dont-stereotype-the-uae-we-believe-in-tolerance-too-0ngrs0mhh88>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

¹⁰⁸ Omar Saif Ghobash, *Letters to a Young Muslim* (London: Picador, 2018)

¹⁰⁹ Omar Saif Ghobash, “Countering Extremist Narratives,” interview by Fred H. Lawson (World Affairs Council, Washington DC, 10 January 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvOB5qRFsew> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹¹⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Al Ketbi, interview with author; Alshateri, interview with author.

¹¹¹ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior American Diplomat, phone interview with author; Jenkins, interview with author; Richards, interview with author.

¹¹² Discussed in interviews with: Courtney Freer (Research Fellow, LSE Middle East Centre), interview with author, 14 February 2019; Shadi Hamid (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019; Stephens, interview with author.

¹¹³ Alshateri, interview with author.

(as the UAE claimed Qatar was doing in Doha), Islamists would seek to aid like-minded groups and activists elsewhere.¹¹⁴ This perception was reinforced, for example, when senior Egyptian Brotherhood figures, linked to the government Morsi administration in Cairo, criticised the UAE and its treatment of Al-Islah.¹¹⁵ In short, the UAE saw in political Islam the most powerful populist political ideology in the MENA, carrying within it a demand for revolutionary political change, not just within individual countries, but across — and against — existing national borders.

8. 2. 4. Qatar and Turkey

The UAE's perception of Qatar and Turkey as drivers of instability in the MENA was directly related to what it considered Doha and Ankara's support for Islamist groups, but also extended to other aspects of their regional policies. Although it not explicit in its public narrative, the UAE has long regarded Qatar as an unwelcome competitor in multiple areas — ranging from hosting US military bases, to functioning as international transit hubs for tourists, trade and financial flows.¹¹⁶ With regard to regional politics, however, the UAE considered Qatar as too favourable to revolutionary change in the region. In its view, Qatar provided material and political support to radical opposition groups and offered shelter to dissidents from countries across the region.¹¹⁷ Most importantly, perhaps, it gave opposition figures and even individuals linked to jihadist groups a platform to criticise sitting governments and spread their ideas to audiences throughout the Arab world and beyond via Doha's network of media outlets, most prominently *Al-Jazeera*.¹¹⁸ In the process, Qatar acted, in the eyes of the UAE, not just independent of, but often in direct opposition to, the interests of its

¹¹⁴ Ghobash, "Geopolitics." Also discussed in interviews with: Alshateri, interview with author; Emirati Academic (A), interview with author.

¹¹⁵ Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "Egypt's Brotherhood War on the UAE," *Gulf News*, 17 June 2013, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/egypts-brotherhood-war-on-the-uae-1.1198481>. [accessed 8 August 2019]; Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "Gulf States Embrace Post-Brotherhood Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2013, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/gulf-states-egypt-muslim-brotherhood.html>. [accessed 8 August 2019].

Also discussed in interview with: Abdulla, interview with author.

¹¹⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Janardhan, interview with author; Christian Koch (Senior Advisor, The Bussola Institute), phone interview with author, 18 April 2019; UK-based Libya Analyst, phone interview with author, 3 December 2019. See also: Andreas Krieg, "The Weaponization of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 91-108; David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring," *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017), 544-562.

¹¹⁷ Al-Otaiba, "Qatar Cannot Have It Both Ways"; Gargash, "The UAE View of the GCC Crisis"; Ghobash, "Geopolitics."

¹¹⁸ Ghobash, "Geopolitics." Also discussed in interview with: UAE-based Political Analyst (A), interview with author.

fellow GCC members. Whether in Libya, Egypt, Syria or elsewhere, Qatar had “sabotaged Gulf diplomacy,” as Gargash put it, by aiding political forces, Islamists in particular, that it could influence, rather than those that were acceptable to its neighbours in the GCC.¹¹⁹ The UAE’s leading role in the effort to politically and economically isolate Qatar from 2017-2021 was primarily driven by this perception that Doha’s regional foreign policy was fomenting regional instability to the direct detriment of the national security of the UAE and its partners.¹²⁰

The UAE regarded Turkey as closely aligned with Qatar, but its perception of Turkey’s regional behaviour as a driver of instability in the MENA went beyond the close ties between Doha and Ankara. From its perspective, Turkey — like Iran — was a non-Arab state unduly seeking to shape political change and achieve a position of hegemony in what it regarded as an essentially Arab region.¹²¹ Yet, while it assessed Iran’s popular appeal as mostly limited to Shia minorities, it saw Turkey’s reach as extending to the broad masses of populations across the Arab world. The UAE was aware of the notion western powers had regarded Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party as a potential model for the region, exemplifying electorally legitimised, Islamically-oriented rule with a track-record of delivering economic growth, at least at the beginning of the 2010s. Turkey’s economic struggles and increasingly strained relations with the USA and European countries in the latter half of the decade may have alleviated some of the UAE’s concerns.¹²² Nevertheless, the UAE still considered Turkey a significant regional power with the military might of a major NATO member, region-wide media networks, and the political will to pursue an agenda that it regarded as being at odds with the region order it wanted to see itself.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Tim Eaton (Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 3 April 2019; Tarek Megerisi (Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations), interview with author, 21 November 2019; UK-based Libya Analyst, interview with author.

¹²⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author. See also: Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020).

¹²¹ Discussed in interviews with: Al Ketbi, interview with author; Alshateri, interview with author; Binhuwaidin, interview with author.

¹²² Discussed in interviews with: Hamid, interview with author; Former US Defence Official, interview with author, 15 October 2019; UAE-based Academic (B), interview with author.

¹²³ Asli Aydintasbas and Cinzia Bianco, “Useful Enemies: How the Turkey-UAE Rivalry Is Remaking the Middle East,” *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

8. 2. 5. Iran

Meanwhile, the UAE's perception of Iran as a driver of instability in the MENA had three main dimensions: Firstly, the UAE had long considered Iran the most immediate state-based threat to its national security and especially to the security of international shipping lanes in the Gulf that its economy relied on. Iran's continuous occupation of the Emirati islands Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs since 1971 was the most obvious manifestation of this.¹²⁴ Alleged Iranian attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf in the late 2010s, including in the port of Fujairah, reinforced this perception.¹²⁵ Secondly, as noted above, the UAE understood Iran to be pursuing a regional policy aimed at expanding its influence over Arab states by systematically subverting their sovereignty and thereby undermining the regional order. From its perspective, this had started with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and the creation of Hizbollah in the 1980s, accelerated with Iran's domination of Iraqi politics after 2003, and further intensified in the wake of the Arab Uprisings.¹²⁶ Most problematic, in the UAE's view, were Iran's efforts to exert influence on the Arabian Peninsula. It did not detect a major Iranian effort to incite its own Shia minority, but saw Iran supporting anti-government activists in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, and most obviously backing the Houthis in Yemen.¹²⁷ In the latter case, in particular, the UAE did not just consider Iranian influence in Yemen's domestic politics as problematic. It viewed the building up of the Houthis' military capabilities as an even more significant threat, as these could hold at risk cities and infrastructure in Saudi Arabia,¹²⁸ shipping lanes around

¹²⁴ See for example: Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*. For a detailed account of the topic by an Emirati author see: Khalid S. Z. Al-Nahyan, *The Three Islands: Mapping the UAE-Iran Dispute* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2013).

¹²⁵ BBC, "Gulf of Oman Tanker Attacks: What We Know," 18 June 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48627014>. [accessed 17 June 2020]; Rania El-Gamal and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Saudi Oil Tankers among Those Attacked off UAE Amid Iran Tensions," *Reuters*, 13 May 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-tankers-fujairah/saudi-oil-tankers-among-those-attacked-off-uae-amid-iran-tensions-idUSKCN1SJ088>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹²⁶ Gargash, "In Conversation."

¹²⁷ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates," (speech, General Debate of the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 26 September 2011), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/66/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020]; M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Speech," (40th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification).

¹²⁸ For example, in June 2019 Houthi missiles hit an airport in Saudi Arabia: Nada Altaher and Bianca Britton, "Missile Hits Arrivals Hall of Saudi Arabia Airport, Injuring 26, Official Says," *CNN*, 12 June 2019, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/12/middleeast/saudi-airport-houthi-missile-intl/index.html>. [accessed 5 June 2020]; See also: Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (4th Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

the Arabian Peninsula,¹²⁹ and potentially even Emirati territory itself.¹³⁰ Finally, the UAE also saw the international community's — and primarily the USA's — engagement with Iran as a source of instability. As noted above, it saw international efforts to normalise relations with Tehran linked to the process surrounding the JCPOA as emboldening Iran's regional behaviour.¹³¹ The UAE feared a nuclear-armed Iran, but considered Tehran's activities in the region "as the bigger problem."¹³² However, while the UAE backed the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, and 'maximum pressure' policy against Iran,¹³³ it was also concerned that tensions could spiral out of control. The Emirati government feared that Iran would follow through on its threats to retaliate against targets in the UAE in the event of a US military strike.¹³⁴

8. 2. 6. The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Before concluding this section, it is important to note that not all factors the UAE has perceived as driving regional instability during the 2010s have featured prominently in its big-picture narrative. In the research for this thesis, two other issues have particularly stood out: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the regional behaviour of, and political change in, Saudi Arabia. Both were issues that the UAE had long regarded as important in shaping regional politics and, ultimately, affecting Emirati national security and regional interests.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict — and wider Arab-Israeli relations — occasionally featured in statements by Emirati leaders and officials about events in the region during the decade. In 2015, Gargash even described it as

¹²⁹ See for example a UAE think tank publication: Amani El-Taweel, "Containing Threats in Bab Al-Mandab," *Future for Advanced Research and Studies*, 16 July 2018, available at: <https://futureuae.com/m/Mainpage/Item/4083/the-strait-containing-threats-in-bab-al-mandab>. [accessed 17 June 2020]. See also: Al-Otaiba, "The Gulf States Are Ready."

¹³⁰ In December 2017, the UAE denied Houthi claims that a missile fired at an Emirati nuclear plant had been intercepted: Shuaib Almosawa and Thomas Erdbrink, "UAE Denies Yemen Rebels Fired Missile at Abu Dhabi Nuclear Plant," *The New York Times*, 3 December 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/world/middleeast/yemen-houthi-missile-abu-dhabi.html>. [17 June 2020].

¹³¹ Al Ketbi, interview with author. See also: Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (3rd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

¹³² Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation," (John Goodwin Tower Center).

¹³³ Anwar Gargash, "UAE Says It Won't Be 'Baited' into Iran Crisis as Tensions Mount," interview by Zainab Fattah and Manus Cranny, *Bloomberg*, 16 May 2019, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-16/u-a-e-won-t-be-baited-into-crisis-with-iran-as-tensions-mount> [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹³⁴ See for example: DW Arabic, "After the 'Iranian Response' the Gulf States Face Increasing Risks? [بعد الرد الإيراني.. دول الخليج في مواجهة مخاطر متزايدة؟]" 8 January 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/ar/بعد-الرد-إيراني-دول-الخليج-في-مواجهة-مخاطر-متزايدة/a-51929147>. [accessed 17 June 2020]. Emirati leader have highlighted the concerns of potential Iranian reprisals against targets in the UAE throughout the decade; see for example: Yousef Al-Otaiba, "Panel Discussion on Us Missile Defense Initiative in the Arabian Gulf," (speech, Atlantic Council Missile Defense Conference: 'The United States and Global Missile Defense,' Washington DC, 22 March 2013), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqHBu_U6t3k [accessed 17 June 2020].

“at the heart of the region's problems.”¹³⁵ However, this did not prevent the UAE from officially normalising relations with Israel in August 2020.¹³⁶ In general, the UAE regarded the unresolved question of Palestinian statehood as destabilising by virtue of its historical pan-regional emotional salience. In its view, this made it a boon for extremist non-state actors across the region and populist Turkish and Iranian leaders seeking to appeal to Arab populations. Furthermore, it considered the conflict an obstacle to what it saw as potentially fruitful strategic relations with Israel, the region's technologically most advanced economy. Besides the conflict itself, the UAE therefore saw both the Israeli and — crucially — the Palestinian leaderships and their unwillingness (or inability) to compromise as contributing to regional instability.¹³⁷

8. 2. 7. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has historically been the other major state-based threat to the UAE's national security, besides Iran. Border disputes that persist to this day,¹³⁸ and the Emirati leadership's longstanding concern about Saudi domination of the GCC played a role in this.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the UAE had also long worked to shield itself from the influence of what it considered to be Saudi Arabia's overly conservative interpretation of Islam.¹⁴⁰ During the 2010s, in particular, the UAE was wary of potential domestic instability in Saudi Arabia, driven by the same socio-economic factors prevalent in other Arab countries. From the UAE's perspective, widespread instability in Saudi Arabia represented a nightmare scenario with deleterious consequences for its own national

¹³⁵ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

¹³⁶ Arab News, “UAE, Israel Reach ‘Historic Deal’ to Normalize Relations,” 13 August 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1718936/middle-east>. [accessed 24 August 2020].

¹³⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Alshateri, interview with author; Ian Black (Senior Visiting Fellow, London School of Economics), interview with author, 19 March 2019; Stephens, interview with author. Emirati leaders have generally refrained from openly criticising the Palestinian leadership, but the UAE is widely regarded as considering the Palestinian Authority in its current form as ineffective; see for example: Peter Baker, “In Muhammad Dahlan's Ascent, a Proxy Battle for Legitimacy,” *The New York Times*, 2 November 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/world/middleeast/muhammad-dahlan-palestinian-mahmoud-abbas.html>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹³⁸ See for example: Noura Al-Mazrouei, “The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Arabia Border Dispute in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017); Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹³⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Christopher Davidson (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), phone interview with author, 17 April 2019; Former Senior British Official, interview with author, 19 March 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (D), interview with author; Steven Wright (Associate Professor, Hamad Bin Khalifa University), interview with author, 1 April 2018. See also: Abdul-Monem Al-Mashat, “Politics of Constructive Engagement: The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates,” in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds. Ali Dessouki and Bahgat Korany (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 457-80; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates*.

¹⁴⁰ Worth, “Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision.”

security and the region as a whole.¹⁴¹ Consequently, the UAE's leadership paid close attention to political change in Saudi Arabia over the course of the decade and strongly endorsed the socio-economic reform agenda launched by Riyadh after 2015.¹⁴² Its participation in the intervention against the Houthis in Yemen could at least in part be attributed to its concern about the group's threat to Saudi Arabia's national security.¹⁴³

In sum, the UAE perceived instability in the MENA as the result of state-based, regional and international factors. In essence, it considered issues and actors as destabilising that undermined the integrity of the region's status quo state system and states' abilities to maintain control over the public sphere within their national borders. Even though the Emirati leadership was confident in the stability of the UAE itself, as is discussed in further detail below, it understood the spread of instability in the wider region, particularly manifested in the proliferation of political forces with transnational agendas, as a threat to its national security and regional interests.

8. 3. Self-Perception: The UAE's Role in the Middle East

The UAE's perception of itself and its role in the MENA during the 2010s combined self-confidence, pragmatism, and a sense of vulnerability. Its official representatives described the UAE as "a safe haven of stability"¹⁴⁴ amidst "the chronic instability of our region;"¹⁴⁵ and as "a standard-bearer for tolerance and diversity"¹⁴⁶ and the representation of "a vision of what the Middle East can become."¹⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, there was a sense that Emirati leaders felt they were "ahead of the game;"¹⁴⁸ Abdulla described this as "something called the UAE momentum."¹⁴⁹ A UAE-based academic observed that "people don't see themselves as a small state here,"¹⁵⁰ instead, the UAE had come to define itself as "a middle power internationally, and a great power

¹⁴¹ Discussed in interviews with: Al Ketbi, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author; Karen Young (Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute), phone interview with author, 7 May 2019.

¹⁴² Gargash, "In Conversation"; Ghobash, "Geopolitics."

¹⁴³ A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Statement," (72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly); Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (4th Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

¹⁴⁴ Al-Otaiba, "The Middle East at an Inflection Point."

¹⁴⁵ Gargash, "Security Architecture."

¹⁴⁶ Gargash, "United Arab Emirates: Minister of State."

¹⁴⁷ A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "The World Must Choose."

¹⁴⁸ Black, interview with author.

¹⁴⁹ Abdulla, interview with author.

¹⁵⁰ Fulton, interview with author.

in the Middle East.”¹⁵¹ Yet, according to a former senior US diplomat, Mohammed bin Zayed also retained “a very acute sense of the limitations of his small country;”¹⁵² another UAE-based academic assessed that Emirati leaders were “aware that they don’t have complete autonomy of their strategic fate.”¹⁵³

The role the UAE adopted in the MENA during the 2010s can be understood as merging these different aspects: It considered it necessary to intervene in crises across the region in order to defend its interests and prevent instability from encroaching on its borders; it did not explicitly claim regional leadership, but felt sufficiently confident to step into what it perceived as an emerging regional power vacuum; and it saw its own political and socio-economic development model — at least elements thereof — as an example other countries in the region should follow. According to Mohammed bin Zayed, the UAE, although still a young county, considered itself a “role model for building of nations.”¹⁵⁴

8. 3. 1. New Assertiveness

The UAE’s self-perception during the 2010s, particularly with regard to foreign policy, was both influenced by, and represented a departure from, the legacy of its founder Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan. Under his leadership, the focus had been on state-building, consolidating the political union of the federation’s seven emirates and constructing a national identity. Emirati and external observers have described Zayed bin Sultan’s foreign policy as “extremely cautious”¹⁵⁵ and intent on working within, and towards, a consensus with other Arab and Muslim countries, but always with a strong emphasis on cooperation amongst sovereign states and rejection of transnational political projects.¹⁵⁶ Yet, as the literature review in Chapter 5 details, Zayed bin Sultan was also a pioneer in regional affairs. He was a key proponent of the 1973/74 oil embargo, the establishment of the GCC in 1981, and Arab participation in military operations to liberate Kuwait in 1991.¹⁵⁷ From the early 1990s onwards, he charged his son, Mohammed bin Zayed, with developing the UAE’s military into a force

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Former Senior American Diplomat, phone interview with author.

¹⁵³ UAE-based Academic (B), interview with author.

¹⁵⁴ M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Statement,” (42nd Anniversary of the UAE National Day).

¹⁵⁵ Emirati Academic (A), interview with author.

¹⁵⁶ See for example: Gaith A. Abdulla, “The Making of UAE Foreign Policy: A ‘Dynamic Process Model’,” *The Emirates Occasional Papers* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014); Al-Mashat, “Politics of Constructive Engagement”; Khalid Al-Mezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid, Identities and Interests* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁵⁷ Peter Hellyer (British-Emirati Historian), email interview with author, in writing, 6 July 2020.

capable of deploying overseas and operating alongside international partners, particularly the USA (including in Somalia, the Balkans and Afghanistan).¹⁵⁸

The next generation of Emirati leaders, led by Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Rashid, carried forward much of this legacy, including the emphasis on promoting nationalism and rejecting Arab or Islamic transnationalism. However, building on their country's now well-established domestic security and rapid economic growth, but a perception that the region around them was "beginning to become more dangerous,"¹⁵⁹ they adopted a more assertive regional foreign policy during the latter half of the 2000 and, especially, throughout the 2010s.¹⁶⁰ They were less occupied with finding regional consensus, and more open about pursuing what they saw as the UAE's national, and particularly economic, interests. As one UAE-based academic described: "economic sense became common sense."¹⁶¹

8. 3. 2. Success Breeds Self-Confidence

The UAE's self-perception during the 2010s was characterised by a high degree of self-confidence. The UAE saw itself as an exceptional success story in the MENA, taking pride in the absence of substantial anti-government protests in the UAE during the Arab Uprisings (a petition for political reform from a group of activists in March 2011 notwithstanding¹⁶²). It was convinced that it owed this to more than its wealth in hydrocarbon natural resources. Instead, it saw the foundation of its success in its governance and development model, consisting of "wise leadership"¹⁶³ focused on fostering national unity and ensuring the government's technocratic effectiveness, the promotion of a social climate of openness and tolerance towards other cultures, and the creation of a globally-oriented business environment conducive to economic progress — all resulting in rising living standards for its citizens and residents. Yet, both before and (especially) during the 2010s, the UAE has also considered its "unique

¹⁵⁸ Abdulla, "The Making of UAE Foreign Policy"; Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*.

¹⁵⁹ Hellyer, interview with author.

¹⁶⁰ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, "New Assertiveness in UAE Foreign Policy," *Gulf News*, 9 October 2012, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/new-assertiveness-in-uae-foreign-policy-1.1086667>. [accessed 17 June 2020]; Abdulla, "The Making of UAE Foreign Policy";

¹⁶¹ Janardhan, interview with author.

¹⁶² Erika Solomon, "Emiratis Petition Ruler for Democratic Elections," *Reuters*, 9 March 2011, available at: <https://af.reuters.com/article/idAFTRE7281NN20110309>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹⁶³ See for example: M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Statement," (43rd Anniversary of the UAE National Day); Saif bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Integrated Doctrine," (speech, World Government Summit, Abu Dhabi, 8 February 2016), available at: <https://www.worldgovernmentsummit.org/annual-gathering/2016/sessions/main-address-saif> [accessed 16 June 2020].

development experiment”¹⁶⁴ as vulnerable to a range of serious threats, both from within and beyond its borders.

The UAE’s economic success was clearly central to its self-confidence. Where other governments in the region had failed to facilitate economic development, the Emirati leadership had presided over the UAE’s evolution into the second-largest Arab economy (despite its small population),¹⁶⁵ the region’s premier commercial hub (Al-Otaiba often described the UAE as “the economic engine for the entire region”¹⁶⁶), and the country the Arab world’s youth were most eager to live.¹⁶⁷ The UAE was also keen to present itself as a model for economic diversification and the transition from a rentier- to a knowledge-based economy. Dubai’s non-oil success was particularly important in this context, although it required papering over the fact that the Emirate needed significant economic support from Abu Dhabi after the 2008 global financial crisis and continued to experience substantial financial struggles through the 2010s.¹⁶⁸ Ultimately, the UAE’s status as a trading nation with commercial ties extending across the world was a key component of its self-image and perception of its regional and international role.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, it also regarded insecurity in the shipping lanes of the Gulf, in particular, and instability in the wider region, more generally, as directly affecting its interests.

Throughout the 2010s, Emirati leaders affirmed the UAE’s political system as a federation of monarchies. “The UAE’s end goal is not a liberal multiparty system,”¹⁷⁰ Gargash wrote in *The National* in 2019. The UAE’s limited elections for the Federal National Council with a gradually growing franchise, were

¹⁶⁴ M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Statement,” (42nd Anniversary of the UAE National Day).

¹⁶⁵ See: The World Bank, “GDP (Current US\$) - Middle East & North Africa,” available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=ZQ&most_recent_value_desc=true. [accessed 10 January 2021].

¹⁶⁶ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Remarks by Ambassador Yousef Al-Otaiba,” (speech, UAE National Day Reception, Washington DC, 2 December 2015), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_MhyL4MlZA [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁶⁷ Faisal Masudi, “Arab Youth Survey: UAE is named top country of choice to live in for ninth straight year,” *Arab News*, 6 October 2020, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/uae/arab-youth-survey-uae-is-named-top-country-of-choice-to-live-in-for-ninth-straight-year-1.74357484> [accessed 10 January 2021]. Emirati leaders frequently highlight survey data like this; see for example: Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy.”

¹⁶⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (A), interview with author; UAE-based Political Analyst (A), interview with author. See also: Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “The Political Economy of Dubai,” in *Dubai’s Role in Facilitating Corruption and Global Illicit Financial Flows*, ed. Matthew Page and Jodi Vittori (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 13-22.

¹⁶⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Terence Clark (former British Ambassador to Iraq), interview with author, 29 March 2019; Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; Janardhan, interview with author; Harold Walker (former British Ambassador to the UAE), interview with author, 29 March 2019.

¹⁷⁰ Gargash, “Amid Challenges.”

intended to facilitate the “inclusion”¹⁷¹ of citizens into the existing political system, rather than to enable changes to it. From the government’s perspective, it derived its popular legitimacy from a combination of the historical legacies of the seven Emirates’ royal families, who were attuned to the views and wishes of the general public (e.g. by engaging in traditional consultative practices such as the majlis¹⁷²), and the wisdom of its leaders, who were instituting a long-term, strategic, technocratic mode of governance focused solely on the development of the country, unencumbered by ideological or political divisions.¹⁷³ According to Gargash, “the roots of regime and state stability are not easy to discern, but surely it has something to do with the legitimacy and achievement of states”¹⁷⁴ — the UAE has generally seen its political system as having excelled at both.

8. 3. 3. Defending the System

The UAE has seen the protection of this system as vital to the very survival of the state itself. As noted above, fostering and maintaining unity amongst the federation’s constituent parts has been a key concern of Emirati leaders since its inception. Abu Dhabi, the by far largest and richest of the seven Emirates, has clearly become more dominant during the 2010s.¹⁷⁵ Domestically, this has been somewhat assuaged by Dubai’s role as an internationally relevant economic centre and Mohammed bin Rashid’s position as the UAE’s Vice President and Prime Minister. On matters of security, defence and foreign policy, however, Abu Dhabi has been in control. The government’s uncompromising stance towards political dissent — both Islamist and other — throughout the 2010s, can at least in part be attributed to an Abu Dhabi-led assessment that political and economic inequality between the seven Emirates

¹⁷¹ Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy.”

¹⁷² Gargash, “Amid Challenges”; Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy.” For information on the UAE’s Majlis system, see: Abu Dhabi Culture, “Al-Majlis,” 2018, available at: <https://abudhabiculture.ae/en/discover/traditions/al-majlis>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹⁷³ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (A), interview with author; Koch, phone interview with author; Worrall, interview with author. See also: S. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Integrated Doctrine.”

¹⁷⁴ Gargash, “Let the Record Show.”

¹⁷⁵ Discussed in interviews with: British Middle East Analyst, phone interview with author, 20 January 2020; Gerd Nonneman (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 17 April 2018; UAE-based Political Analyst (A), interview with author. See also: Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Perceptions and Divisions in Security and Defense Structures in Arab Gulf States,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 19-36.

could be a source of societal division.¹⁷⁶ Gargash explained the UAE's "natural aversion to political parties," describing them as vehicles for polarisation — along tribal, clan or sectarian lines — and therefore threats to "the unity of the state and the cohesiveness of the society."¹⁷⁷

In contrast to this commitment to autocratic politics, the UAE has taken pride in having created an open environment that affords its citizens, large expat and migrant population, and foreign visitors with more economic, cultural, social and religious freedoms than many other countries in the MENA. The UAE's official narrative has consistently emphasised values such as "moderation, tolerance and peaceful coexistence."¹⁷⁸ Central to this was the UAE's approach to the relationship between religion and politics. Emirati leaders and officials have occasionally described the UAE as pursuing a "secular vision,"¹⁷⁹ but this is best understood as a rhetorical simplification intended particularly for western audiences. The UAE's actual position is more nuanced. The UAE has always defined itself as a Muslim country; in fact, Emirati nationals interviewed for this thesis repeatedly described Emirati society as religiously conservative.¹⁸⁰ Simultaneously, the UAE also consistently emphasised its tolerance for other religions, including the rights of non-Muslims to worship freely within its borders. In the words of Gargash, "while minority faiths are diminishing elsewhere in the Middle East, they thrive among us."¹⁸¹ According to Peter Hellyer, a British-Emirati historian who has worked closely with the UAE's most senior leaders on the discovery and protection of the country's pre-Islamic archaeological heritage, the promotion of religious dialogue, including through events such as

¹⁷⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Freer, interview with author; Emile Hokayem (Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies), interview with author, 27 March 2019; Ulrichsen, interview with author. See also: ourtney 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 (2017), 479-500; Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?" *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017), 129-53.

¹⁷⁷ Gargash, "Amid Challenges."

¹⁷⁸ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates," (speech, General Debate of the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 27 September 2014), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/69/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁷⁹ Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

¹⁸⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Najla Al Qassimi (Researcher, Dubai Public Policy Center), phone interview with author, 20 July 2020; Binhuwaidin, interview with author.

¹⁸¹ Gargash, "Security Architecture."

Pope Francis' visit to Abu Dhabi in 2019,¹⁸² was “not just a political gambit,” but “something fundamental about the UAE’s political/social philosophy.”¹⁸³ When it comes to matters of politics or economics, however, the UAE was very clear in that religion does not have “a day-to-day guiding role to play in the running of the country.”¹⁸⁴

The UAE has seen this combination of religious tolerance and technocratic governance as an important enabling condition for its development success, freeing political and economic decision-making from religious constraints, and making the UAE an attractive trade partner and destination for businesses and tourists alike.¹⁸⁵ As noted above, the UAE’s hostility towards Islamism has to be understood in this context. It saw both Daesh’s violence and the revolutionary change of MB-style political Islam as a threat to its governance model and its international standing. Emirati representatives have often argued that a single terrorist attack in, or linked to, the UAE could harm the country’s economy by damaging its reputation as a safe place for business.¹⁸⁶ The example of the US Congress decision in 2006 to reject the takeover of six American ports by DP World on national security grounds, which was tied to the involvement of two Emirati nationals in the 9/11 attacks has also often been cited in this regard.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, the UAE’s leadership, particularly that of Abu Dhabi, perceived MB-style political Islam as both an internal and an external threat to the UAE’s national unity and sovereignty. It regarded Al-Islah as an opposition group that could have exploited intra-Emirati inequality, while receiving support and guidance from other MB aligned groups across the region.¹⁸⁸

The UAE’s leadership has sought to maintain national unity not just through the tight control of the political public sphere, but also by strengthening Emirati

¹⁸² Mohammed Al-Shamak, “The Pope in Abu Dhabi: Why? And What Comes After? [لماذا؟ وماذا؟] البابا في أبوظبي.. لماذا؟ وماذا؟ بعد؟,” *Al-Ittihad*, 6 February 2019, available at: <https://www.alittihad.ae/wejhatarticle/101304/البابا-في-أبوظبي-لماذا-وماذا-بعد؟> [accessed 18 June 2020]; Sofia Barbarani, “Papal Visit: Pope Francis Lands in Abu Dhabi for Historic First Gulf Trip,” *The National*, 3 February 2019, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/the-pope-in-the-uae/papal-visit-pope-francis-lands-in-abu-dhabi-for-historic-first-gulf-trip-1.821388>. [accessed 18 June 2020].

¹⁸³ Hellyer, interview with author.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (A), interview with author; Expert on UAE Foreign Policy, interview with author; Hellyer, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (B), interview with author.

¹⁸⁶ Al Qassimi, interview with author.

¹⁸⁷ David Sager, “Under Pressure, Dubai Company Drops Port Deal,” *The New York Times*, 10 March 2006, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/10/politics/under-pressure-dubai-company-drops-port-deal.html>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹⁸⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Al Ketbi, interview with author; Freer, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author.

nationalism. Besides the annual celebration of the UAE's National Day and the promotion of national projects such as the UAE's space programme that launched a mission to Mars in July 2020,¹⁸⁹ this has included a growing emphasis on the country's armed forces as a national institution. The introduction of mandatory military service for all male citizens in 2014, the designation of an annual Martyr's Day in 2015, and the general reverence in the national media towards the military, including casualties suffered in deployments overseas, can be understood in this context.¹⁹⁰ Emirati leaders, particularly Mohammed bin Zayed, who has fashioned himself, and is widely regarded, as a military man, have persistently described the UAE's armed forces as a vehicle for national unity.¹⁹¹ For example, addressing troops in 2016, Mohammed bin Zayed said: "you pave the way for a brighter future of security and stability, and of a development protected by power and unity," praising "the heroic role you play in defending our nation and standing up against the threats to Arab security."¹⁹²

8. 3. 4. Rising Regional Power

This statement offers a segue to the UAE's perception of its role in the MENA during the 2010s, in which its military played a substantial part. In the western media, the UAE has often been described as "little Sparta," a moniker given to the country by former US General and Defence Secretary James Mattis.¹⁹³ However, while the expeditionary capabilities of its armed forces are a source of considerable pride, with officials frequently highlighting contributions to numerous US-led military operations,¹⁹⁴ the UAE has understood its role in the region as going far beyond that of a martial power.¹⁹⁵ In general, this role can be

¹⁸⁹ Al-Ittihad, "The Emirates to Mars [الإمارات إلى المريخ]," *Al-Ittihad*, 19 July 2020, available at: <https://www.alittihad.ae/news/الإمارات-إلى-المريخ/4110920/الإمارات>. [accessed 10 January 2021]; James Langton, "Hope Springs Anew for Arab Science with Launch of Mars Probe," *The National*, 13 July 2020, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/science/hope-springs-anew-for-arab-science-with-launch-of-mars-probe-1.1048174>. [accessed 10 January 2021].

¹⁹⁰ Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "What Intervention in Yemen Means for UAE's National Identity," *Time*, 22 September 2015 available at: <http://time.com/4040220/uae-intervention-in-yemen/>. [accessed 18 October 2019]; Eleonora Ardemagni, "'Martyrs' for a Centralized Uae," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 13 June 2019, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79313>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹⁹¹ M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Speech," (39th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification).

¹⁹² M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Speech," (40th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification).

¹⁹³ See for example: Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; Yoel Guzansky, "Sparta in the Gulf: The Growing Regional Clout of the United Arab Emirates," *INSS Insight* 883 (8 January 2017); David B. Roberts, "Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World," *Security Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020), 301-334.

¹⁹⁴ Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation," (RAND Events); Yousef Al-Otaiba, "The Moderate Middle East Must Act," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 2014, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/yousef-al-otaiba-the-moderate-middle-east-must-act-1410304537>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹⁹⁵ Hellyer, interview with author.

understood as combining the above highlighted attributes of confidence, pragmatism and vulnerability.

The UAE felt that it had to adopt a more assertive and interventionist regional foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Uprisings in order to defend itself against “the multitude of threats in the regional environment.”¹⁹⁶ As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, the UAE saw the region around it descend into profound instability during the 2010s, in which forces were unleashed that it considered as fundamentally hostile to its own governance model. According to Abdullah bin Zayed, the UAE felt “actively under attack by extremists”¹⁹⁷ and therefore had to act. The UAE saw the gains of Islamist parties across the region, the rise of Daesh and proliferation of Iranian-supported Shia militias, and the spread of conflict in general as threatening, perhaps not to its survival as a state, but certainly to its prosperity and regional influence. It could hardly be the “economic engine for the entire region”¹⁹⁸ and link to the rest of the world, if this region was collapsing and/or turning against the UAE politically and ideologically.¹⁹⁹ “A quietist approach of staying out of things became virtually impossible to maintain.”²⁰⁰

Further, the UAE saw itself as one of the leading regional powers during the 2010s. In part, it felt that it had been given this responsibility by default. As historical Arab powers — Egypt, Syria, Iraq and even initially Saudi Arabia — had collapsed or were facing inward after the Arab Uprisings, and the USA appeared unwilling to intervene, there was “a sense of if not us then who”²⁰¹ amongst Emirati leaders. Concurrently, the UAE also considered itself uniquely qualified to assume leadership responsibilities, seeing itself as “the most successful Arab state.”²⁰² According to Al-Otaiba, “whether on the battlefield or at the negotiating table, the UAE is ready to lead with confidence.”²⁰³ The UAE mostly sought to present itself as “a teamplayer”²⁰⁴ that preferred to work alongside, and in support of, larger Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia and

¹⁹⁶ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

¹⁹⁷ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Canada, UAE Stand Together against Extremism,” *The Globe and Mail*, 8 October 2014, available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/canada-uae-stand-together-against-extremism/article20966761/> [available at: 17 June 2020].

¹⁹⁸ Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point.”

¹⁹⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

²⁰⁰ Hellyer, interview with author.

²⁰¹ Fulton, interview with author.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point.”

²⁰⁴ Abdulla, interview with author.

Egypt. According to Emirati academic Albadr Alshateri, the UAE was mostly “willing to play second fiddle to Saudi Arabia as the recognised regional leader.”²⁰⁵ As such, the UAE let Riyadh claim the lion’s share of the credit for brokering the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018, for example,²⁰⁶ but it was also content for Saudi Arabia to be the main target of international criticism for the war in Yemen. Similarly, while the UAE was the main Arab power intervening in Libya, certainly since 2014,²⁰⁷ it often portrayed its involvement in the country as motivated by its commitment to supporting Egypt’s national security interests.²⁰⁸ Throughout, however, the UAE arguably considered itself the more strategically capable actor, and certainly not as subservient to either Saudi Arabia or Egypt. As Abdulla put it, the UAE was more comfortable appearing as “the co-pilot [...] although we know that the UAE probably is better set to take the lead.”²⁰⁹

In accordance with this sentiment, the UAE understood itself as “a model in development for all Arab states to learn from.”²¹⁰ Throughout the 2010s, Emirati representatives described their country as “taking the lead to offer a new vision for young Muslims and the region”²¹¹ and “trying to project our own society across the region.”²¹² As noted throughout this section, the UAE saw in the events in the MENA during the 2010s confirmation that its political and socio-economic model was superior to any others in the region. It viewed itself as “the aspirational centre”²¹³ and “the leading light”²¹⁴ of the Arab world. The UAE was aware of its natural limitations as a small state, both in terms of its ability to project power and the direct applicability model to significantly larger states.²¹⁵

²⁰⁵ Alshateri, interview with author.

²⁰⁶ Discussed in interview with: Stephens, interview with author. See also: International Crisis Group, “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact,” *Middle East Report* 206 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019).

²⁰⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Eaton, interview with author; Megerisi, interview with author; UK-based Libya Analyst, interview with author. See also: Tarek Megerisi, “Libya’s Global Civil War,” *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

²⁰⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Al Qassimi, interview with author. See also: Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point.”

²⁰⁹ Abdulla, interview with author.

²¹⁰ Binhuwaidin, interview with author.

²¹¹ Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point.”

²¹² Ghobash, “Countering Extremist Narratives.”

²¹³ Stephens, interview with author.

²¹⁴ Neil Quilliam (senior research fellow, Chatham House), personal interview with the author, London, United Kingdom, February 2019.

²¹⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior American Diplomat, phone interview with author; Thomas Juneau (Associate Professor, University of Ottawa), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019; Jane Kinninmont (Head of Programmes, The Elders), interview with author, 4 April 2019; UAE-based Academic (A), interview with author.

But it certainly saw an opportunity during the 2010s to expand its regional influence, not least by convincing larger Arab powers — again, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia — to at least partially adopt its views about economic development and regional affairs. A former Emirati diplomat, said “we see the importance of a big country like Saudi Arabia to have a similar model like the UAE [...] at least in part;”²¹⁶ and according to one Emirati academic, the UAE was seeing itself as “a catalyst [...] If you do something and it becomes an idea that other people would think about [...] then you’ve started a reaction.”²¹⁷

In sum, the UAE perceived itself as occupying an exceptional position in the MENA during the 2010s. It saw regional instability as a major threat to its national security and regional interests. But also felt itself uniquely capable to influence regional affairs and promote itself and its governance model, which combined authoritarian politics and social and cultural openness in the pursuit of economic prosperity, across the region.

8. 4. Conclusion

The UAE’s perception of the strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s was that of a region becoming “more unstable by the day.”²¹⁸ From its perspective, the Arab Uprisings laid bare the weakness and developmental failures of several Arab states, particularly those not under monarchical leadership. The ensuing power vacuum was further exacerbated by successive American administrations that, in the UAE’s view, were at worst working at cross-purposes with their traditional partners in the region, and at best unwilling to invest significantly in restoring the regional order. The UAE saw the region descend into instability fomented and exploited by extremist non-state actors, both Sunni and Shia, that were in turn directed or supported by the revisionist non-Arab regional powers Iran and Turkey, and its Gulf neighbour and rival Qatar. It perceived these forces as subverting Arab states and seeking to dismantle the region’s status quo state system, while pursuing or promoting an Islamist ideology that it regarded as fundamentally opposed to its own model of governance. Throughout, the UAE regarded Iran as a main conventional, state-based threat to its national security and the security shipping lanes in the Gulf.

²¹⁶ Al Qassimi, interview with author.

²¹⁷ Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

²¹⁸ Abdulla, interview with author.

Yet, it assessed the interpretation of political Islam advocated the MB and its affiliates (backed by Turkey and Qatar), and jihadist groups like AQ and Daesh — it regarded the latter’s violence as an extension of the same ideas endorsed by the MB — as an even more serious threat to itself and the region as a whole. Meanwhile, the UAE perceived itself as the most successful Arab state; a regional power both by default, as others were crumbling, and by choice, driven by ambition and self-confidence. It saw political turmoil and economic crises in other Arab countries as confirming the righteousness of its own political and socio-economic model that combined visionary leadership, a strong but benevolent authoritarian state, and carefully controlled social and cultural openness in the pursuit of economic prosperity. It genuinely considered itself as the region’s “vital political, economic and cultural hub”²¹⁹ and the manifest example “that Arab countries can be just as progressive, just as global in their outlook and just as ambitious for the welfare of their people as any other, despite the chronic instability of our region.”²²⁰ In defining its role in the MENA, the UAE was therefore driven both by the impetus to protect itself and its interests, but also by a sense that it could lead the region into a better future by convincing others to at least partially subscribe to its way of thinking about governance and regional affairs. The UAE felt that “our system of government has delivered stability and prosperity to our citizens,”²²¹ and that it could and should “spread the message of stability, unity and evolution as a counter to those who foment violence.”²²² What the UAE’s conception of stability in the MENA looked like — aside from a utopia in which the entire region was refashioned in its image — is the subject of the next chapter.

²¹⁹ Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “UAE and China: A Vision for Future Relations,” *China Daily*, 14 December 2015, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-12/14/content_22705761.htm.

²²⁰ Gargash, “Security Architecture.”

²²¹ Gargash, “Our Solution for Libya.”

²²² Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

9. The UAE's Conception of Stability

Evolution towards the Emirati Example

The UAE's foreign policy "extends a hand to whatever will ensure world peace and stability"¹ according to Mohammed bin Zayed. Speaking on the occasion of the UAE's National Day in 2014, he explained that "based on our national interests and the importance of safeguarding the region's stability,"² the UAE had, for example, supported the government of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in Egypt: "the stability of Egypt will impact the stability of the whole region and the safety of Arab nations and peoples."³

Throughout the 2010s, Emirati leaders and officials confidently claimed that the UAE had a vision for bringing stability to the region. After having supported the popular uprisings in Libya and Syria, at least at the beginning of the decade, this included an increasingly strident denunciation of any form of revolutionary change. According to Anwar Gargash "revolutions [...] arouse excitement and optimism among observers from outside the region, yet for those who are on the rollercoaster, who actually have to live with the consequences, this unpredictability is far more disturbing, painful and dangerous."⁴ This did not mean that the UAE was been against change per se: "As we seek to stabilise the region, we must concurrently strive to move beyond the status quo,"⁵ Gargash explained, "the world is changing, you can't stay where you are [...] you need to move in an evolutionary, but forward manner."⁶ In this regard, the UAE presented itself as leading by example; as Omar Saif Ghobash, "we want

¹ Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Speech of Mohamed bin Zayed," (speech, 38th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification, Abu Dhabi, 5 May 2014), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=13 [accessed 15 June 2020].

² Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, "Statement by His Highness General Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan," (speech, 43rd Anniversary of the UAE National Day, Abu Dhabi, 1 December 2014), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=14 [accessed 15 June 2020].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Anwar Gargash, "Security Architecture in the Middle East: Building on Sand?" (speech, GlobSec 2019, Bratislava, 7 June 2019), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=Wosu0CPGDkc [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁵ Anwar Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (speech, 3rd Annual Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 13 November 2016), available at: <https://epc.ae/storage/events/speeches/7KfIkUs2ShRT0xOUH9gSBvMcsZu0hBPR1tsoFlih.pdf> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁶ Anwar Gargash, "In Conversation with Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash," interview by Sunjoy Joshi and Harsh Pant, *ORF*, 21 March 2018, available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/conversation-dr-anwar-mohammed-gargash-cabinet-minister-minister-state-foreign-affairs-uae-strategic-relations-india-uae-crisis-middle-east/> [accessed 15 March 2019].

our fellow Arabs to engage in the same step-by-step approach that we have followed.”⁷

This chapter analyses the UAE’s conception of stability in the MENA during the 2010s. While the chapter does not claim that the UAE had a consistent definition of stability in the MENA, nor a comprehensive strategy to achieve it, it identifies a number of essential components that the UAE associated with the systems of order it considered conducive to stability in the region. These included the rejection of revolutions and the preference for government-directed evolutionary change, exemplified by the UAE itself, as indicated in the preceding paragraphs. The chapter further argues that the UAE conceived of stability in the MENA as based on strong Arab states led by governments focused both on facilitating socio-economic development and controlling the public sphere in their countries. In a regional order centred around the twin pillars Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both orienting themselves by the UAE’s example and strategic direction, it wanted Arab states to take responsibility for resolving regional crises, with or without external support, but certainly asserting regional leadership, rather than leaving it to Iran or Turkey. Further, Arab states needed to hold at bay political — particularly transnational and Islamist — ideologies advocating revolutionary change, whether championed by non-state actors or states with revisionist regional agendas such as Iran, Turkey or Qatar. Finally, it wanted external powers — most of all the USA, but also Russia, China and others — to enable and support stability in the MENA by reliably upholding the region’s state system and focusing on pursuing their security and economic interests, with the UAE as their primary regional interlocutor.

9. 1. The Role of External Powers

The UAE saw the active engagement of external powers in the MENA as an important contributing factor for regional stability. It regarded the involvement of the USA, some European countries, but increasingly also Russia and China, in providing regional security as essential, while seeing growing economic ties with China (and Asia, more generally) as important to its own prosperity and the region’s economic development. Ultimately, the UAE wanted external powers, and especially the permanent members of the UN Security Council, to uphold

⁷ Omar Saif Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy: A Vision to Lead Us from Violence,” (speech, Wharton SEI Center Distinguished Lecture, Wharton, 24 October 2014), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rr_ATwgP3Zg [accessed 16 June 2020].

the region's system of sovereign states. From its perspective, external powers contribution to regional stability was to help “curb rogue states tendencies to destabilise the region, and to combat extremist and terrorist groups;”⁸ it did not want them to push for political change inside Arab states, lest this empowered “extreme groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁹

In the past, the UAE had generally regarded US hegemony in the MENA, expressed not least in security guarantees for Washington's closest regional partners, including the UAE itself, as foundational to regional stability. Aspects of this still applied during the 2010s, but, as the previous chapter outlines, the UAE concluded that “in the current international order you cannot write a cheque for someone to come and guarantee regional security on your behalf.”¹⁰ According to Gargash, the UAE thought that a major US-led intervention to restore regional order like “the operation to liberate Kuwait from Saddam's invasion is not really in the cards today.”¹¹ Yet, the UAE also assessed that the USA and European countries remained tied to the MENA by important strategic interests; and that projected that Russian and Chinese interests in the region were likely to increase (along with those of other Asian powers). Confident in its own capabilities and international reputation as a reliable and effective partner, the UAE was comfortable with the notion of a more diverse set of external powers engaging in the MENA. As “the most committed Gulf country to the principle of burden-sharing in the region,”¹² as Ebtasam Al-Ketbi put it, the UAE saw an opportunity in positioning itself as the preferred interlocutor for all these countries. It considered itself both pragmatic and influential enough to adapt to the different interests pursued by Washington, London, Paris, Moscow or Beijing, but also to harness their power for its own regional agenda.

9. 1. 1. The Rules-Based International Order

International institutions such as the United Nations, and the associated notion of a rules-based international order, played an important, but ultimately limited role in the UAE's conception of stability in the MENA. The UAE regarded its

⁸ Albadr Alshateri (Adjunct Professor, UAE National Defence College), email interview with author, email, 17 April 2019.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ebtasam Al Ketbi (President, Emirates Policy Center), phone interview with author, 13 July 2020.

¹¹ Gargash, “Security Architecture in the Middle East.”

¹² Al Ketbi, interview with author.

active participation in these institutions as an integral part of its foreign policy.¹³ Its hosting of the International Renewable Energy Agency, for example, illustrates how the UAE sought to present itself as the primary global hub of the MENA directly contributing to global governance.¹⁴ Furthermore, the UAE saw international norms such as state sovereignty and the preservation of the nation state — “the building block of the world order”¹⁵ — as foundational principles to its conception of regional stability.¹⁶ Emirati representatives often highlighted Iran’s occupation of Abu Musa and the Great and Lesser Tunbs islands as an issue that needed to be rectified through the consistent application of international law.¹⁷

Yet, the UAE’s frustration with what it regarded as the ineffectiveness of the conflict resolution mechanisms enshrined in the UN Charter (both before and during the 2010s) was also very apparent. Its conception of stability in the MENA was therefore more focused on the respective regional policies of the most important global powers. In fact, with regard to its involvement in the conflict in Libya, the UAE has arguably sought to leverage its relationships with one or several of the permanent members of the UN Security Council to undermine UN-led mediation efforts, or at least to ensure that their outcomes did not run counter to its interests. Several leading experts described how the UAE worked with France and Russia to provide support for Khalifa Haftar, who

¹³ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 26 September 2011), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/66/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020]; Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 27 September 2014), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/69/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Expert on UAE Foreign Policy, interview with author, 25 March 2019; UAE-based Political Analyst (B), phone interview with author, 8 July 2020. See also: International Renewable Energy Agency, “IRENA Headquarters Agreement Signed with the United Arab Emirates,” 3 June 2012, available at: <https://www.irena.org/newsroom/pressreleases/2012/Jun/IRENA-Headquarters-Agreement-signed-with-the-United-Arab-Emirates>. [accessed 21 June 2020]; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Repositioning the GCC States in the Changing Global Order,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011): 231-47.

¹⁵ Emirati Academic (B), phone interview with author, 9 April 2020.

¹⁶ Discussed in interviews with: UAE-linked Political and Economic Consultant, interview with author, 28 March 2019; UAE-based Academic (A), phone interview with author, 8 April 2019; US-based Gulf Analyst (D), phone interview with author, 25 November 2019. See also: A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Statement,” (69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly); Anwar Gargash “Keynote Speech,” (speech, 4th Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 12 November 2017), available at: <https://youtu.be/a4l8BBRJGlo> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹⁷ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 28 September 2012), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/67/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020]; Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Iran Nuclear Deal after 1 Year: The View from the UAE,” (speech, United Against a Nuclear Iran, New York, 28 September 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSakhhGx9XI> [accessed 15 June 2020].

repeatedly acted as a spoiler to the UN-brokered negotiation processes.¹⁸ They noted that this alignment with Paris and Moscow helped to shield Abu Dhabi from (at least official) international criticism or censure, despite its documented involvement in violations of the prevailing UN arms embargo on Libya.¹⁹

9. 1. 2. The USA

The UAE continued to see the USA as the most important external power in the MENA, both for its national security and with regard to its conception of stability in the region. However, it concluded that the US role in the region was changing; independent of who was in the White House and based on what it understood as a fundamental “reassessment of the region”²⁰ in Washington. While it was fearful of US disengagement, it also saw some opportunity in this changing reality. As noted in the previous chapter, the UAE had considered the Bush administration’s interventionism and President Obama’s engagement with Iran and openness to deal with political forces like the MB (especially in Egypt) as anathema to regional stability. It vocally endorsed the Trump administration’s approach to the region — Al-Otaiba, for example, said that the UAE was “relieved that there is finally a policy [...] to push back on Iranian behaviour”²¹ — but also considered it erratic and unreliable. Ultimately, the UAE felt that stability in the MENA could benefit from a more limited and increasingly transactional US involvement in the region.

The UAE was therefore comfortable with the notion that Washington would want its regional partners to take more responsibility for regional security themselves. It considered itself in a prime position to do so, confident in its capabilities and institutional relationship with the US military, grown over the course of joint operations in the region and beyond since the 1990s.²² Yet, it also hoped that its willingness to burden-share would translate into an American openness to let it set some of the regional agenda. Specifically, it wanted the USA to abandon

¹⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Tarek Megerisi (Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations), interview with author, 21 November 2019; UK-based Libya Analyst, phone interview with author, 3 December 2019.

¹⁹ Panel of Experts on Libya, “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011),” UN Security Council (S/2019/914) (New York: United Nations, 2019).

²⁰ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

²¹ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Qatar and the Middle East,” interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 26 July 2017, available at: <https://charlierose.com/videos/30799> [accessed 15 June 2020].

²² See for example: Gaith A. Abdulla, “The Making of UAE Foreign Policy: A ‘Dynamic Process Model’,” *The Emirates Occasional Papers* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014); Hussein Ibish, *The UAE’s Evolving National Security Strategy* (Washington DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2017).

past democratisation efforts in Arab states and focus on matters of regional security. Al-Otaiba was explicit about this when he defined the basis of US-Emirati relations in 2015 in front of a US audience; he said that “we still don’t share your democratic values, but we are great [security and economic] partners.”²³

From the UAE’s perspective, to support stability, US engagement in the MENA had to centre on two priorities: terrorism and Iran. It saw US leadership in military counter-terrorism efforts as essential, and hoped to convince policy-makers in Washington of its views regarding MB-style political Islam as the basis of Islamic extremism.²⁴ It also wanted the USA to side unequivocally with its traditional partners — and Israel — vis-a-vis Iran, rejecting what it understood as Obama’s attempt to establish a degree of “equivalency”²⁵ between the regional positions of Tehran and Arab capitals. That meant deterring Iranian threats to the freedom of navigation in the Gulf, and accepting that any deal to limit Iran’s nuclear programme, while necessary in principle, needed to be coupled with the containment and, if possible, the severing of, Iranian influence in the region.²⁶ Yet, it was also clear that the UAE wanted the efforts to be carefully calibrated, with any military action against Iran being strictly limited to covert operations and confrontations with Tehran’s regional partners; a large-scale armed conflict had to be avoided at all cost as this would inevitably threaten the UAE’s national security.²⁷

9. 1. 3. Europe

European countries, meanwhile, only played a limited role in the UAE’s conception of stability in the MENA. Members of the European Union and the UK were seen as attractive trade partners and destinations and/or sources of

²³ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Road to Camp David: The Future of the US-Gulf Partnership.” (speech, Atlantic Council, Washington DC, 7 May 2015), available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/webcasts/the-road-to-camp-david-the-future-of-the-us-gulf-partnership> [accessed 20 June 2020].

²⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (A), phone interview with author, 27 June 2019; Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 15 February 2019; UK-based Political Risk Analyst, interview with author, 8 April 2019.

²⁵ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “A Conversation with His Excellency Yousef Al Otaiba,” (speech, John Goodwin Tower Center, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, 20 October 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98FRC9CNsTU> [accessed 16 June 2020].

²⁶ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Gulf States Are Ready for Peaceful Coexistence - If Iran Is,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 2017, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-gulf-states-are-ready-for-peaceful-coexistence-if-iran-is-1488499030>. [accessed 15 June 2020]; Gargash, “Security Architecture in the Middle East.”

²⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Najla Al Qassimi (Researcher, Dubai Public Policy Center), phone interview with author, 20 July 2020; Thomas Juneau (Associate Professor, University of Ottawa), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019.

investment, both for the UAE's own economy and as it considered the prospects for the wider region's economic development.²⁸ In terms of security, it saw France and the UK as partners that that could make tactically important contributions or fill specific strategic caps. Bilateral ties with Paris and London had long been important in the equipment and training of the Emirati armed forces,²⁹ and the UAE valued European contributions to maritime operations aimed at securing shipping lanes in the Gulf against Iranian interference.³⁰ As noted above, the UAE also worked closely with France in Libya, supporting political and military forces associated with Haftar.³¹ In general, however, it saw European approaches to the region in a similar light to that of the USA: It wanted them to be reliable partners in counter-terrorism and reigning in Iranian and Turkish regional policies, while refraining from advocating for democratising political change in Arab countries that could empower Islamist groups.

9. 1. 4. Russia and China

Meanwhile, Russia and China became increasingly important in the UAE's views regarding regional stability. It did not see them as capable or willing to replace the USA, neither as the UAE's most important defence partner, nor as the dominant security provider in the region. But it considered them as valuable bilateral partners and external powers whose involvement in the region was likely to expand and could be harnessed in line with its own conception of stability, both in the short- and long-term, particularly in areas the USA no longer appeared to be interested in. In fact, in some aspects, the UAE considered Moscow and Beijing's approaches to the MENA as more in line with its own interests than Washington's.

From the UAE's perspective, Russia and China shared its aversion to popularly-driven political revolutions and western democracy promotion efforts. It appreciated their outwardly displayed support for state sovereignty and non-interference as the foundations of international order — however selectively Moscow and Beijing adhered to these themselves. Moreover, the UAE saw

²⁸ Discussed in interviews with: UK-based Academic (A), interview with author, 27 February 2019; UK-based Middle East Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 5 April 2019.

²⁹ Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*; David B. Roberts, "Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World," *Security Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020), 301-334.

³⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Christian Koch (Senior Advisor, The Bussola Institute), phone interview with author, 18 April 2019; UK-based Middle East Analyst (A), interview with author.

³¹ Discussed in interviews with: Megerisi, interview with author; UK-based Libya Analyst, interview with author.

Russia and particularly China's authoritarian political systems as more suitable examples for Arab states to emulate than destabilising western propositions of multi-party democracy. According to one UAE-based academic, the UAE saw "natural synergy"³² between Beijing and its own approach to governance: "China has proved that [...] you can have economic reform"³³ without liberalising political structures; another interviewee noted that China's use of "technology to control minute details of the daily lives of your citizens,"³⁴ for example, was attractive from the perspective of Emirati leaders.

The UAE also saw alignment with Russia and China's opposition to, and broad definition of, religious extremism. This was apparent, for example, in the UAE's response to Russia's intervention in Syria. It criticised Moscow's support for the Syrian regime, especially in the early years of the conflict,³⁵ but also publicly acceded to Russian claims that military operations were aimed against Islamic extremists, even as they were targeting forces aligned with the opposition at least nominally endorsed by the UAE.³⁶ The UAE also cooperated with Russia on initiatives to promote an effectively state-controlled interpretation of Sunni Islam in contrast to the religiously-rooted political ideology advocated by the MB and other Islamist groups.³⁷ An example of this was the international conference held in Grozny, in 2016, organised by the UAE-based Tabah Foundation, which produced a closing statement condemning political Islam.³⁸ Similarly, the UAE's silence regarding China's repression of Uyghur communities in Xinjiang, supposedly driven by counter-extremism motives, was notable. A UAE-based analyst described this as an expression of the UAE's non-ideological approach

³² Janardhan, interview with author.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Former US Defence Official, interview with author, 15 October 2019.

³⁵ Yousef Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation with His Excellency Yousef Al Otaiba, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States," (speech, RAND Events, Washington DC, 1 June 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDWVqvHbONQ> [accessed 16 June 2020]; Anwar Gargash, "Keynote Speech" (speech, 2nd Annual Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 1 November 2015), available at: <https://epc.ae/storage/events/speeches/jjSn0wZgXuprArFonBocbCqllbslkjorD9VvFanO.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2021].

³⁶ Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the UAE: An Ideational Partnership," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020), 125-40. See also: Omar Saif Ghobash, "Countering Extremist Narratives," interview by Fred H. Lawson (World Affairs Council, Washington DC, 10 January 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvOB5qRFsew> [accessed 15 June 2020].

³⁷ US-based Gulf Analyst (D), interview with author. See also: Samuel Ramani, "Why the Relationship between Russia and the United Arab Emirates Is Strengthening," *Responsible Statecraft*, 24 January 2020, available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/01/24/why-the-relationship-between-russia-and-the-united-arab-emirates-is-strengthening/>. [accessed 19 June 2020].

³⁸ Karen Smith-Diwan, "Who Is Sunni? Chechnya Islamic Conference Opens Window on Intra-Faith Rivalry," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 16 September 2016, available at: <https://agsiw.org/who-is-a-sunni-chechnya-islamic-conference-opens-window-on-intra-faith-rivalry/>. [accessed 18 June 2020].

to foreign policy,³⁹ but media reports suggest that it also reflected an at least tacit endorsement.⁴⁰ (The UAE's preferences regarding governance systems and state-religion relations in the MENA are discussed in detail below.)

Generally, the UAE regarded China as a rising global superpower with far more long-term potential as a partner — both bilaterally and for regional stability — than Russia.⁴¹ In the short-term, however, it saw China's contribution to regional stability as mostly restricted to the economic realm. The UAE saw great promise in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — “a trade corridor that has the [MENA] region as its centre” connecting Asia, Europe and Africa — for its own and the region's economic development. It worked to position itself as the BRI's regional bridgehead and Beijing's favoured strategic interlocutor in the region.⁴² Over time, it hoped, China's increasing economic investment in the MENA would “naturally draw”⁴³ it into more substantial security provision commitments in the region as well.⁴⁴ Russia, meanwhile, was a more immediate factor in regional security matters, from the UAE's perspective. According to Gargash, “the Russians perhaps are not a major global player, but in many issues in the region they are a major determining factor how things will go.”⁴⁵ Some disagreements notwithstanding (such as Emirati concerns regarding Russia's apparent toleration of Iran's position in the region), the UAE found much common ground with Moscow's positions in the region. This was particularly apparent in Libya and Sudan towards the end of the 2010s, where Russia supported — politically and by deploying the private military company Wagner — the UAE's favoured political and military factions: Haftar in Libya, and the

³⁹ Janardhan, interview with author.

⁴⁰ See for example: France 24, “China Thanks UAE for Backing Beijing's Xinjiang Policies,” 22 July 2019, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20190722-china-thanks-uae-backing-beijings-xinjiang-policies>. [accessed 20 June 2020].

⁴¹ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; Jonathan Fulton (Assistant Professor, Zayed University, UAE), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019; Janardhan, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (D), interview with author.

⁴² Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; Fulton, interview with author; Janardhan, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author.

⁴³ Fulton, interview with author.

⁴⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulkhaleq Abdulla (Professor Emeritus, UAE), interview with author, 23 July 2019; Fulton, interview with author; Janardhan, interview with author.

⁴⁵ Anwar Gargash, “United Arab Emirates: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Anwar Bin Mohammed Gargash,” (speech, Asia Society, New York, 26 September 2018), available at: <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/events/united-arab-emirates-minister-state-foreign-affairs-dr-anwar-bin-mohammed-gargash> [accessed 15 June 2020].

Transitional Military Council in Sudan.⁴⁶ Even in Syria, the UAE ultimately considered Russia's intervention as productive — here and elsewhere it saw Moscow oppose “the elements that try to break up the structure of the nation state,”⁴⁷ primarily meaning Islamist groups. Furthermore, the UAE hoped that Russia's influence in the region could be harnessed counter what it viewed as Turkey's — and ideally also Iran's — revisionist regional policies. The UAE's alleged endorsement of Russia's opposition to Turkey's interventions in northern Syria and western Libya in 2019 could be understood in this context.⁴⁸

In sum, the UAE considered the involvement of external powers an important contributing factor to regional stability — and its national security. As it assessed that the era of US hegemony to be over, it was comfortable with the notion of a more diverse set of countries (potentially going beyond those discussed above⁴⁹) seeking to influence developments in the MENA. In fact, the UAE saw an opportunity in acting as the most capable and reliable regional interlocutor — whether on economic and security matters — for the USA and European countries, as well as for Russia, China or others. Throughout, its main concern was that external powers did not support revisionist political projects in the region or endorse political revolutions that could empower Islamist groups. In general, the UAE even considered a degree of geopolitical competition between external powers as potentially advantageous, as long as it provided the UAE with a chance for pragmatic hedging and served to keep the USA, in particular, engaged in the region.⁵⁰ Yet, at the end of the 2010s, the UAE was also beginning to worry that growing animosity between the USA and China. A scenario in which the UAE had to choose between its essential security ties with Washington and an equally important economic relationship with Beijing was a

⁴⁶ Ramani, “Russia and the UAE.” Regarding Libya, also see: Wolfram Lacher, “The Great Carve-Up: Libya's Internationalised Conflicts after Tripoli,” *SWP Comment*, no. 25 (2019). Regarding Sudan, also see: Shankara Narayanan, “The Mercenaries Behind Russian Operations in Africa,” *Jamestown Foundation*, 15 November 2019, available at: <https://jamestown.org/the-mercenaries-behind-russian-operations-in-africa/>. [accessed 20 June 2020].

⁴⁷ Mohamed Binhuwaidin (Associate Professor of Politics, UAE University), email interview with author, 3 July 2020.

⁴⁸ Giorgio Cafiero, “UAE Boosts Assad as Part of Anti-Turkey Strategy,” *Responsible Statecraft*, 16 April 2020, available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/04/16/uae-boosts-assad/>. [accessed 20 June 2020]; Ramani, “Russia and the UAE.”

⁴⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Janardhan, interview with author.

⁵⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Former US Defence Official, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 27 March 2019. See also: Jean-Loup Samaan, *Strategic Hedging in the Arabian Peninsula*, Whitehall Paper 92, (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2018).

nightmare. As one former Emirati diplomat put it, “that would be worrying, because we are in the middle.”⁵¹

9. 2. The Organisation of Regional Order

In its conception of stability in the MENA, the UAE sought a regional order that combined the restoration and preservation of the region’s status quo state system, with an effort by itself and other Arab countries to more assertively shape regional affairs. It saw a need for “restoring balance in the region”⁵² by pushing back against what it perceived to be Iranian and Turkish-backed regional projects undermining the sovereignty of Arab states; and wanted to consolidate its expanded role in the region and, together with other like-minded Arab states, “move to the driver’s seat and determine our own future course”⁵³ for the region.

9. 2. 1. Protecting the Nation State

To achieve stability, the UAE contended, the regional order had to be based on “protecting the nation state,”⁵⁴ and therefore a commitment by all stakeholders to norms of state sovereignty and non-interference in each others’ internal affairs. In this particular aspect, the UAE’s conception of stability could be seen as being about the preservation, or rather return to, the regional status quo. As Gargash put it, for the UAE stability in the MENA required “rejuvenating and creating credibility for the Arab nation state”⁵⁵ that had been under a long-standing assault from the various malign forces promoting transnational and revolutionary political projects outlined in the previous chapter.⁵⁶ This was also how the UAE has justified its own interventions in the internal affairs of fellow Arab states during the 2010s. Its military operations in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen,⁵⁷ or its support for the separatist Southern Transitional Council in

⁵¹ Al Qassimi, interview with author.

⁵² Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Speech of Mohamed Bin Zayed,” (speech, 39th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification, Abu Dhabi, 4 May 2015), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=15 [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁵³ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (4th Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

⁵⁴ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

⁵⁵ Anwar Gargash, “Political and Military Responses to Extremism in the Middle East,” (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 9 December 2017), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue-test/archive/manama-dialogue-2017-c364/plenary2-3454/dr-anwar-mohammad-gargash-ba8b> [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁵⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Al Ketbi, interview with author; Binhuwaidin, interview with author; Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

⁵⁷ For references to accounts of all of these interventions see the literature review in Chapter 5.

Yemen⁵⁸ could be interpreted as running counter to principles of state sovereignty. Yet, in the UAE's portrayal, its interventions were authorised by an international mandate (i.e. the UN Security Council resolution 1973 authorising the 2011 intervention in Libya⁵⁹), conducted upon request for legitimate governments (i.e. Bahrain in 2011, Yemen in 2015⁶⁰), or carried out in support of local partners defending their countries against Islamist groups with transnational agendas (i.e. Haftar and his allies in Libya since 2014⁶¹). Similarly, the UAE justified its support for the STC in Yemen, but also for Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria by depicting them as the only viable local partners against much worse alternatives such as Daesh or other groups it considers extremist, while insisting that issues such as southern Yemeni separatism and Iraqi/Syrian Kurdish independence were matters to be eventually resolved amongst Yemenis, Iraqis and Syrians, respectively.⁶² Nevertheless, these cases stood as examples of the UAE's own regional interests and strategic expediency trumping principle, at least in the short-term.

9. 2. 2. An Arab Region

The UAE wanted Arab states to move to the centre of the regional order. As one Emirati academic put it, "reflecting [the MENA's] Arab-centric nature, it would like the problems to be solved by Arab nations themselves."⁶³ The previous chapter explains that the had UAE regarded the past few decades, and the 2010s in particular, as "a period of Arab weakness."⁶⁴ In Syria, for example, it saw a conflict that had started "as Arab killing Arab"⁶⁵ become so

⁵⁸ See for example: Peter Salisbury, "Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy," *Research Paper* (London: Chatham House, 2020).

⁵⁹ A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Statement," (66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

⁶⁰ Regarding Bahrain, see for example: A. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, "Statement," (66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly); Mohammed bin Zayed A-Nahyan, "Speech of Mohamed bin Zayed," speech, 40th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification, Abu Dhabi, 5 May 2016), available at: https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=16 [accessed 15 June 2020]. Regarding Yemen: Gargash, "Keynote Speech," (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate); UAE Embassy Washington DC, "Foreign Policy," available at: <https://www.uae-embassy.org/about-uae/foreign-policy> [accessed 11 May 2018].

⁶¹ Anwar Gargash, "Our Solution for Libya," *The National*, 19 May 2019, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/dr-anwar-gargash-our-solution-for-libya-1.863113>. [accessed 10 July 2019]. Also discussed in interview with: Al Qassimi, interview with author.

⁶² Baraa Shiban (Caseworker, Reprieve), interview with author, 1 April 2019. See also: Staff Writer, "UAE's Gargash to Kurdistan: Federalism Is More Viable Than Separation," *Al-Arabiya*, 23 September 2017, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/09/23/UAE-minister-Gargash-Federal-system-better-alternative-to-separation->. [accessed 20 June 2020]; Staff Writer, "Gargash: Yemeni Govt, STC Must Engage in Saudi Initiative to Reduce Tension," *Al-Arabiya*, 1 September 2019, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/09/01/Gargash-Yemeni-govt-STC-must-engage-in-Saudi-initiative-to-reduce-tension>. [accessed 20 June 2020].

⁶³ UAE-based Academic (A), interview with author.

⁶⁴ Gargash, "In Conversation."

⁶⁵ Ghobash, "Countering Extremist Narratives."

internationalised that it “moved above our pay-grade.”⁶⁶ Worse than allowing external powers to shape regional conflicts, the UAE perceived the lack of Arab leadership to have empowered the region’s non-Arab states — Gargash complained that Iran and Turkey, in particular, had become “more influential in many ways in the Arab region than some of the Arab states.”⁶⁷ Yet, the UAE considered no single Arab state, itself included, to be strong enough to act as the regional leader, nor did it want the regional order to be dominated by any individual Arab government. It therefore wanted Arab states to work together in asserting regional leadership, though only in a very specific way.

The UAE had supported the development of, and consistently professed its commitment to, regional organisations like the Arab League and the GCC,⁶⁸ but the events of the 2010s also strengthened its pessimism about their efficacy in coordinating multilateral cooperation and addressing the region’s challenges. From its perspective, the former had never been capable of more than determining the lowest common denominator of its members, even before it was compromised by Iran’s influence over the Lebanese, Iraqi or Syrian governments;⁶⁹ and the latter was rendered ineffective by Qatar’s obstinacy.⁷⁰ To an extent, the UAE arguably contributed significantly to the weakness of the regional organisations. It played a leading role in the isolation of Qatar since 2017, which was widely seen as having bypassed GCC-internal conflict resolution mechanisms.⁷¹ Moreover, since its inception as a federation (and before, as individual Emirates), the UAE was a leading advocate of sovereignty and mutual non-interference as the cornerstones of any informal or institutionalised regional cooperation initiative. Keen to protect its independence and wealth, and hostile towards any notion of a transnational political project

⁶⁶ Al-Otaiba, “A Conversation,” (RAND Events).

⁶⁷ Gargash, “In Conversation.”

⁶⁸ For example: M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Speech,” (39th Anniversary of UAE Armed Forces Unification); Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Panel Discussion on Us Missile Defense Initiative in the Arabian Gulf,” (speech, Atlantic Council Missile Defense Conference: ‘The United States and Global Missile Defense,’ Washington DC, 22 March 2013), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqHBu_U6t3k [accessed 17 June 2020].

⁶⁹ Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

⁷⁰ Anwar Gargash, “Qatar Must Be Stopped from Financing Terror,” *The Times*, 8 June 2017, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatar-must-be-stopped-from-financing-terror-3gdd02xkm>. [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁷¹ Discussed in interviews with: Stephens, interview with author; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Baker Institute Fellow, Rice University), phone interview with author, 1 April 2019. See also: Andreas Krieg, ed., *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Other accounts of the Gulf Crisis are referenced in Chapter 5.

that could supersede Emirati national sovereignty, it traditionally called for constraining, rather than empowering regional institutions.⁷²

During the 2010s, and especially since 2015, the UAE therefore sought to promote a different model for Arab regional leadership, founded upon a trilateral alliance between itself, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. “Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in our view, are the keystones on which the region's stability depends,”⁷³ according to Gargash, and the UAE often portrayed its activities in the region — including the intervention in Yemen and Libya — as taking place in concert with, and even in support of, Riyadh and Cairo’s interests.⁷⁴ The motives behind this close embrace of Saudi Arabia and Egypt could be understood as twofold: Firstly, for all its confidence in the superiority of its own governance model and righteousness of its regional agenda, it considered Saudi Arabia and Egypt the Arab world’s historic leaders whose power and regional clout it could — and needed to — harness to substantiate its idea of a “moderate Arab centre.”⁷⁵ However, and secondly, assessing that scenarios in which Saudi Arabia or Egypt were to either collapse or pursue regional policies counter to Emirati interests were anathema to stability, the UAE concluded that Riyadh and Cairo had to be kept close. Throughout the 2010s, Emirati representatives consistently affirmed that “our security is tied to the security of Saudi Arabia,”⁷⁶ and that “the stability and prosperity of Egypt reinforces the stability of our region,”⁷⁷ and therefore emphasised the need for “a strong and developing Saudi Arabia and a stable, robust Egypt.”⁷⁸

The UAE had historically feared both the prospect of an overly powerful, and an internally unstable Saudi Arabia. Throughout the 2010s, and influenced by the

⁷² Discussed in interviews with: Christopher Phillips (Reader, Queen Mary, University of London), interview with author, 26 March 2019; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

⁷³ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

⁷⁴ Regarding Yemen, see for example: Al-Otaiba, “A Conversation,” (John Goodwin Tower Center). Also discussed in interview with: Al Qassimi, interview with author. Regarding Libya: Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point,” (speech, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 29 January 2016), available at: <https://www.csis.org/events/middle-east-inflection-point> [accessed 15 June 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: Abdulla, interview with author.

⁷⁵ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (2nd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

⁷⁶ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 29 September 2018), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/73/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁷⁷ Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement of His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates,” (speech, General Debate of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2 October 2015), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/70/united-arab-emirates> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁷⁸ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (4th Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate).

experience of the Arab Uprisings, the UAE was worried about the uncertain trajectory of the Kingdom's economy, and the approaching transfer of power to the next generation of the Saudi royal family.⁷⁹ It saw a major opportunity in the royal succession in Riyadh in 2015, and especially in the rise to power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Bilateral relations had already converged during King Abdullah's reign, but the alignment between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh accelerated after 2015, manifested, for example, in the establishment of the Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council in 2016, chaired by Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman, who were widely reported to have a close personal relationship.⁸⁰ From the UAE's perspective, Mohammed bin Salman appeared, at least initially, to be the ideal candidate to be Saudi Arabia's next long-term ruler. It liked his domestic socio-economic reform programme, including the restrictions he placed on the most conservative factions of the Saudi religious establishment, and deemed it an effective endorsement of its own development model. Regionally, he did not just embrace the notion of more assertive Arab leadership, but also echoed the UAE's hardline anti-Islamist views.⁸¹ To an unprecedented degree, Emirati leaders were therefore comfortable with, and outright supportive of, a powerful Saudi Arabia, at least "as long as they can shape the thinking and behaviour of that powerful Saudi Arabia."⁸² Yet, the UAE was also concerned about some aspects of Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, particularly towards the end of the 2010s. From its perspective, the failed attempt to pressure Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign in 2017, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, and the lack of Saudi military success against the Houthis in Yemen, were damaging Saudi Arabia's standing as a regional leader, risking to tarnish the UAE by association, and potentially even undermining both the Kingdom's, and therefore the region's, long-term political stability. Ultimately, however, the UAE saw no viable

⁷⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (A), interview with author; Emile Hokayem (Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies), interview with author, 27 March 2019; Juneau, interview with author; Neil Quilliam (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 26 February 2019.

⁸⁰ See for example: Andreas Krieg, "Die MBZ-Doktrin," *Zenith*, 10 July 2018, available at: <https://magazin.zenith.me/de/politik/die-vae-und-autoritäre-regime-der-arabischen-welt> [accessed 12 February 2020]; Neil Quilliam, "The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom's Position in the Gulf Crisis," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 109-26; Robert Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future," *The New York Times Magazine*, 9 January 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/magazine/united-arab-emirates-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>. [accessed 12 February 2020].

⁸¹ Discussed in interviews with: Al Qassimi, interview with author; Al Ketbi, interview with author; Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; Hokayem, interview with author; John Jenkins (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 18 April 2019.

⁸² Hokayem, interview with author.

alternative to Mohammed bin Salman's success — or at least his survival. It hoped that its regional agenda could be enhanced by harnessing the Kingdom as “a force multiplier”⁸³ for Emirati ideas, but, more importantly, it concluded that for regional stability to even be a possibility, it “cannot allow Saudi Arabia to fail.”⁸⁴

Similarly, the UAE's insistence on Egypt's status as a central pillar of a stable regional order, was primarily based on an assessment that due to its historic position at the centre of regional politics, and as the Arab world's most populous country it was too big to fail.⁸⁵ The UAE also saw potential in capitalising on some of Egypt's unique levers of power in support of its regional agenda. In its view, Cairo still retained diplomatic weight and an at least symbolic regional leadership role that could amplify Emirati strategic ideas; and it regarded Egypt's Al-Azhar, one of the premier institutions of Sunni Islam, as an important partner that could give legitimacy to the form of state-controlled religious practice it was promoting across the region.⁸⁶ But while the Emirati narrative often praised the Egyptian military as the Arab world's largest fighting force and the central institution of the Egyptian state, the UAE did not put much stock in its power projection capabilities.⁸⁷ Its acceptance of Cairo's refusal to deploy troops to Yemen, for example, was notable;⁸⁸ and its support for the Haftar-aligned camp in Libya, in addition to numerous other interests, was partially intended to provide security along Egypt's western border,⁸⁹ and therefore suggested an assessment that the Egyptian military could do so by itself. Indeed, in the UAE's conception, Egypt's primary contribution to regional stability was to be stable itself. The UAE's views regarding state-level stability are discussed in detail in the next section. With regard to the regional order, however, what mattered to the UAE was that Cairo supported, or at least did not contradict, its agenda. Most obviously, this meant that the MB-dominated

⁸³ Stephens, interview with author.

⁸⁴ Karen Young (Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute), phone interview with author, 7 May 2019.

⁸⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Al Qassimi, interview with author; Former Senior American Diplomat, phone interview with author, 16 May 2019.

⁸⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior American Diplomat, interview with author; Courtney Freer (Research Fellow, LSE Middle East Centre), interview with author, 14 February 2019.

⁸⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; British Middle East Analyst, phone interview with author, 20 January 2020.

⁸⁸ There are no examples of Emirati leaders publicly criticising Cairo's refusal to deploy Egyptian forces to Yemen.

⁸⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Tim Eaton (Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 3 April 2019; Megerisi, interview with author. See also: Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018)

government led by Mohammed Morsi from 2012-2013 was anathema to the UAE. Emirati representatives often argued that the Islamists' inexperience and style of governance only further destabilised Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings.⁹⁰ More importantly, however, they feared the regional influence the MB could wield by holding the reins of power in Cairo.⁹¹

As for other Arab states, the UAE similarly saw their primary function in the regional order in maintaining their own domestic stability (see below), and in acceding to the leadership of the UAE-Saudi-Egypt bloc. Qatar and its regional foreign policy that included, in the UAE's view, the promotion of an "anti-stability rhetoric"⁹² in support of popular uprisings and backing for MB-linked Islamists and a larger regional role for Turkey, constituted an intolerable impediment in this context. According to Gargash, Qatar "has spent effort and money trying not to help us as allies should, but to undermine us and to destabilise various countries, including the largest Arab state, Egypt."⁹³ In essence, the UAE considered Qatar's attempts to exert influence in the region in zero-sum terms that made any notion of compromise with Doha unlikely. It saw the political and economic isolation of Qatar as a necessary measure, even as it rendered the GCC inoperable and hurt its own economy (primarily that of Dubai).⁹⁴ The UAE assented to the normalisation of relations with Doha in January 2021 primarily because it recognised that the Saudi government no longer wanted to pay the political cost to keep the measures against Qatar in place, not because it considered any of its disagreements with Qatar resolved.⁹⁵

9. 2. 3. Turkey, Iran and Israel

As noted above, the UAE sought a regional order in which Arab states asserted themselves vis-a-vis the region's non-Arab powers. As Gargash put it, "we

⁹⁰ Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, "Exclusive Interview," interview by Jon Sopel, *BBC News*, 17 January 2014, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeDb2nU9jKU> [accessed 16 June 2020]; Yousef Al-Otaiba, "Counterterrorism and Regional Security," (speech, American Security Project, Washington DC, 12 June 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVLY0PcLVT8> [accessed 19 June 2020].

⁹¹ Discussed in interviews with: Freer, interview with author; Shadi Hamid (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution), interview with author, 30 May 2019; UAE-based Academic (B), phone interview with author, 26 June 2019.

⁹² Omar Saif Ghobash, "Geopolitics: Ideology and Fragmentation in the Middle East," (speech, Margaret Thatcher Conference on Security, Centre for Policy Studies, London, 27 June 2017), available at: <http://www.cps.org.uk/security2017/> [accessed 15 June 2020].

⁹³ Anwar Gargash, "The UAE View of the Gcc Crisis: What Happened and What Happens Next?" (speech, Chatham House, London, 17 July 2017), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/gulf-crisis-why-it-happened-and-what-happens-next> [accessed 16 June 2020].

⁹⁴ Stephens, interview with author.

⁹⁵ Michael Stephens, "Sunshine over the Gulf," *Royal United Services Institute*, 7 January 2021, available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/sunshine-over-gulf>. [accessed 10 March 2021].

might disagree within the Arab family, but if there is trespassing on any of our borders [...] we have to deal with it.”⁹⁶ Throughout the 2010s, it was clear that amongst the three major non-Arab countries in the region, Turkey, Iran and Israel, the UAE considered the latter the least problematic. In fact, as confirmed with official normalisation and rapid expansion of bilateral Emirati-Israeli relations in August 2020,⁹⁷ the UAE saw Israel as an attractive partner, both for its domestic development and with regard to regional order. As it sought to “transform itself into a knowledge-based economy,”⁹⁸ Emirati academic Al-Shateri explained, it wanted to benefit from open engagement with the advanced and technology-focused Israeli economy. Regionally, the UAE viewed the close Israel-USA relationship as an important factor keeping the USA engaged in the region, and its status as the most Israel-friendly Gulf state as bolstering its reputation in Washington. Furthermore, it perceived a natural alignment with Israel’s opposition towards Islamist and any other transnationally-orientated non-state actors in the Arab world, and clear stance against Turkish and Iranian attempts to expand their influence in the region.⁹⁹ Yet, the UAE also saw engagement with Israel as the best way to affect Israeli behaviour it considered to be potentially detrimental to regional stability. As noted above, and further discussed below, the UAE feared that regional tensions with Iran could escalate into a major military confrontation. It likely hoped that direct engagement with Israel would at least give it a degree of access to Israeli decision-making in this regard. Furthermore, the UAE considered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “a gift to radicalism”¹⁰⁰ in the region, an instrument for populist leaders — including those in Ankara and Tehran, and those of Daesh or Hezbollah — to appeal to anti-Israeli sentiment amongst Arab populations. While its preference would be to secure an official resolution of the Palestinian statehood question, it made the pragmatic assessment that it could use engagement with Israel to prevent unilateral actions, such as Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, that would make matters even worse.

⁹⁶ Gargash, “In Conversation.”

⁹⁷ Arab News, “UAE, Israel Reach ‘Historic Deal’ to Normalize Relations,” 13 August 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1718936/middle-east>. [accessed 24 August 2020].

⁹⁸ Alshateri, interview with author.

⁹⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Alshateri, interview with author; Ian Black (Senior Visiting Fellow, London School of Economics), interview with author, 19 March 2019; Jane Kinninmont (Head of Programmes, The Elders), interview with author, 4 April 2019; Lord David Richards of Herstmonceux (Former British Chief of Defence Staff), interview with author, 8 April 2019; Former British Government Official, interview with author, 25 February 2019; Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁰⁰ Gargash, “Political and Military Responses.”

This view was explicitly articulated in an op-ed by Al-Otaiba in the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* in June 2020.¹⁰¹

Some of the pragmatism exhibited in the decision to normalise relations with Israel also applied to the UAE's views regarding Iran and Turkey's possible integration into the regional order. Emirati officials and commentators frequently highlighted the long history of productive economic relations between the UAE and Iran, regardless of political differences (e.g. over Iran's regional behaviour and occupation of the three Emirati islands). One former Emirati diplomat, acknowledged that for many years the UAE's economic relations with Iran had been "more extensive"¹⁰² than those of many other Arab states, and according to Al-Otaiba, "no country has more to gain from more peaceful and productive ties with Iran than we do."¹⁰³ Similarly, Al-Qassimi said that "ten years ago we had a perfect relationship with Turkey,"¹⁰⁴ and Al-Shateri prognosticated that if Turkey were to change its regional course, "the relationship will dramatically change between the two countries."¹⁰⁵

Yet, while the UAE did not perceive Israel as a direct threat to its national security and regional interests (in Al-Otaiba's words, "we don't see Israel as an enemy"¹⁰⁶), it saw Iranian and Turkish conduct in the region much more negatively. Ultimately, the UAE wanted Iran and Turkey to end what it regarded as their respective campaigns to expand their regional influence by promoting revisionist political projects in the region that were couched in transnational, religiously-based ideologies. It wanted Iran to halt its support for (mostly) Shia non-state actors across the region (including Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilisation Units in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, but also the Sunni organisation Hamas in Palestine) and cease trying to export its Islamic Revolution. Likewise, it wanted Turkey to stop advocating for revolutionary change and the MB and its affiliates. According to Gargash, Iran could be part of the regional order if it behaves as "a normal state,"¹⁰⁷ that "stays within its own borders and that

¹⁰¹ Yousef Al-Otaiba, "Annexation Will Be a Serious Setback for Better Relations with the Arab World," *Ynetnews*, 12 June 2020, available at: <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/H1Gu1ceTL>. [accessed 23 June 2020].

¹⁰² Al Qassimi, interview with author.

¹⁰³ Al-Otaiba, "The Middle East at an Inflection Point."

¹⁰⁴ Al Qassimi, interview with author.

¹⁰⁵ Alshateri, interview with author.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation," (John Goodwin Tower Center).

¹⁰⁷ Gargash, "United Arab Emirates: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs."

abandons its imperial ambitions”¹⁰⁸ — and the same applied to Turkey.¹⁰⁹ More to the point, the UAE wanted both Tehran and Ankara to accept that as non-Arab states they should leave Arab politics — both within and amongst Arab states — to be addressed by Arab governments. Instead of seeking to engage in the ideational space and attempt to influence popular opinion amongst Arab populations, Iran and Turkey had to focus solely on economic engagement in the region. In fact, as also indicated in the statements quoted above, the UAE considered the Iranian and Turkish economies as having a lot more to offer in the MENA’s economic development than those of most Arab states.

There was a sense that that at least towards the end of the 2010s, the UAE displayed a greater degree of pragmatism towards engagement with Iran than with Turkey. Long-term, its conception of regional stability required drastic changes in both countries strategic direction and, likely, political leaderships. In the meantime, however, there were indications that the UAE saw detente with Iran as at least a temporary bridge towards establishing a more stable regional order, while it showed no such flexibility towards Turkey. The explanation for this was multidimensional. The UAE assessed the version of political change backed by Turkey to have broader popular appeal in the Arab world than Iran’s Islamic Revolution. It considered it much more likely that young Saudis, Egyptians and, crucially, Emiratis could be drawn towards MB-style electorally-legitimised political Islam, than Iran’s system, which could more readily be compartmentalised as a sectarian, Shia-focused ideology. Related to this, as a NATO-member with established, albeit damaged, ties to all external powers interested in the MENA, Turkey was a viable candidate to occupy the kind of linkage-position between the region and the rest of the world that the UAE sought for itself. At the same time, the UAE saw Iran, and more specifically a regional war against Iran, as posing the most significant conventional threat to its national security. Emirati leaders repeatedly expressed their belief that the UAE would become a target of Iranian retaliation for any military attack against it, “whether we’re involved or not involved.”¹¹⁰ The UAE’s confrontation with

¹⁰⁸ Gargash, “Security Architecture in the Middle East.”

¹⁰⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Alshateri, interview with author.

¹¹⁰ Al-Otaiba, “Panel Discussion on US Missile Defense Initiative in the Arabian Gulf.”

Turkey, meanwhile, played out far beyond its borders, primarily in Libya,¹¹¹ the Horn of Africa¹¹² and the eastern Mediterranean.¹¹³ It did not that Turkish troops were stationed in Qatar, but it did not consider them to pose a conventional military threat to its national security. The UAE supported regional and international efforts to isolate Iran (including the US-led sanctions regime),¹¹⁴ and Emirati leaders have described the leadership Tehran as a “beast”¹¹⁵ too ideologically motivated to constructively engage with.¹¹⁶ But at times of particularly high tensions, such as in 2019 and early 2020, the UAE dialled down its rhetoric and instead initiated direct de-escalatory talks with Tehran, even after alleged Iranian attacks on tankers near Fujairah.¹¹⁷ At the strategic level, its rejection of Iran’s inclusion in the regional order remained, but tactically it saw a necessity for dialogue. With regard to Turkey, this necessity did not exist or, at the very least, had not yet emerged.

In sum, the UAE sought a regional order in which Arab states set the agenda and ensured that the region’s status quo state system was maintained. Specifically, it wanted a central triangle consisting of Saudi Arabia and Egypt as the symbolic twin pillars of the Arab world, and the UAE itself providing intellectual and strategic direction, to assert regional leadership. Together, this coalition had to win over other Arab states, including through interventions and other coercive methods, if necessary, as they confronted the (separate, but equally extremist) transnational regional projects, driven by revolutionary Islamist ideologies, that were championed by Iran and Turkey (and Qatar). Ultimately, all countries in the region, including the three non-Arab states, could

¹¹¹ Arab News, “UAE Official Tells Turkey to Stop Meddling in Arab Affairs over Libya,” *Arab News*, 2 August 2020, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1713091/middle-east>. [accessed 3 August 2020]. See also: Wolfram Lacher, *Libya’s Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020).

¹¹² International Crisis Group, “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact,” *Middle East Report 206* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019).

¹¹³ Cinzia Bianco, “Gulf Monarchies and the Eastern Mediterranean: Growing Ambitions,” in *Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines*, ed. ECFR (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern_med/gcc. [accessed 10 January 2021].

¹¹⁴ Anwar Gargash, “UAE Says It Won’t Be ‘Baited’ into Iran Crisis as Tensions Mount,” interview by Zainab Fattah and Manus Cranny, *Bloomberg*, 16 May 2019, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-16/u-a-e-won-t-be-baited-into-crisis-with-iran-as-tensions-mount> [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹¹⁵ Gargash, “United Arab Emirates: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.”

¹¹⁶ Gargash, “Keynote Speech,” (3rd Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate). Also discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; UAE-based Academic (A), interview with author.

¹¹⁷ Dion Nissenbaum, “UAE Stops Short of Directly Accusing Iran over Attacks on Ships,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 2019, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-stops-short-of-directly-accusing-iran-over-attacks-on-ships-11559871239>. [accessed 21 June 2020]; Amir Vahdat and Aya Batrawy, “UAE and Iran Hold Rare Talks in Tehran on Maritime Security,” *Associated Press*, 31 July 2019, available at: <https://apnews.com/49c6da1c33fd45bbaf1b14836ee5e2ec>. [accessed 21 June 2020].

become part of the regional order if they abandoned ideological and revisionist regional policies and instead focused on economic cooperation. Throughout, it is clear that the UAE considered MB-style political Islam as the most significant ideational threat, and Iran and the prospect of a regional war involving Iran as the biggest conventional threat to the regional order and its national security. It regarded all other issues, including the question of Palestinian statehood, for example, as secondary and manageable through pragmatic engagement between sovereign states led by strong governments.

9. 3. State-Level Order

The UAE saw strong Arab states as the foundation of a stable regional order. Specifically, as noted above, UAE often emphasised its commitment to “the concept and value of a nation state as a political entity”¹¹⁸ and its view that stability in the MENA required “rejuvenating and creating credibility for the Arab nation state.”¹¹⁹ In the first instance, this meant that Arab states could only be stable if they were not dominated by non-Arab powers, particularly those the UAE saw as posing a threat to wider regional stability. As one former Emirati diplomat explained, “We don’t want to have an agreement with Iraq and the second day we have a problem with Iran we see Iraq jeopardising their agreement with us.”¹²⁰ The previous chapter explains the UAE’s perception of the strategic environment in the region as one in which the survival of Arab states, including that of the UAE itself, was threatened by a combination of state and non-state actors with revisionist ambitions promoting transnational revolutionary ideologies — Islamism in the 21st century, pan-Arabism in the past. The Emirati government recognised the salience these supranational identities had — historically and during the 2010s — in domestic and regional politics. It saw the notion of sovereign and independent nation states, which in its interpretation could draw on Islam and Arabness, but ultimately defined their identity more narrowly and with reference to a specific territory, as the conceptual framework that made the existence of the UAE as a political entity viable in the first place. From the UAE’s perspective, stability in the MENA therefore required that “the state is the building block”¹²¹ of the region and that

¹¹⁸ Binhuwaidin, interview with author.

¹¹⁹ Gargash, “Political and Military Responses.”

¹²⁰ Al Qassimi, interview with author.

¹²¹ Emirati Academic (B), interview with author.

regional politics, although taking place in the context of religious and ethnic commonalities that transcended borders, were ultimately based on “state-to-state relationships.”¹²² At the state level, the UAE’s conception of stability was therefore focused on (re)building and strengthening the systems — and, essentially, having the leaders in place — that could guarantee a state’s behaviour accordingly.

9. 3. 1. The Emirati Model

The UAE’s initial point of reference for what constituted a stable Arab state and good governance was its own political and socio-economic model. The UAE did not claim to have a one-size-fits-all template that all other states in the region could emulate. Its government acknowledged that the UAE’s small population and extraordinary natural resource wealth, its federal structure, geographic location and other defining features, represented a different set of circumstances for development than those facing leaders in Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Syria.¹²³ Nevertheless, in an expression of the self-confidence outlined in the previous chapter, there was a genuinely Emirati belief “that the key features of the UAE system can form the basis of positive development in other parts of the Arab world.”¹²⁴ The UAE considered development, and therefore change (primarily economic, but also political), essential for the stability of Arab states. It saw a return to the status quo that prevailed in many Arab states prior to the Arab Uprisings as neither possible, nor desirable — Al-Ketbi explained, the UAE concluded that the political and socio-economic drivers behind the mass-protests in 2011 “will not vanish” and that “the demands of people need to be taken seriously.”¹²⁵ However, “looking at what has happened over the last decade,” Gargash explained in 2018, the UAE assessed that development in the MENA required an “evolution rather than a revolution.”¹²⁶ In the strategic environment of the MENA, not least conditioned by the presence of the above referenced supranational identities that could be manipulated by revisionist and

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Al-Otaiba, “A Conversation,” (RAND Events); Anwar Gargash, “Let the Record Show: The UAE Stays True to National Goals,” *The National*, 16 September 2012, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/let-the-record-show-the-uae-stays-true-to-national-goals-1.357834>. [accessed 15 March 2015]. Also discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; UAE-based Academic (A), interview with author.

¹²⁴ Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy.”

¹²⁵ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

¹²⁶ Gargash, “United Arab Emirates: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.”

extremist state and non-state actors, change therefore had to be carefully controlled by strong governments.

The UAE claimed that it was not promoting any particular political system in the MENA.¹²⁷ According to Emirati professor Mohammed Binhuwaidin, “the UAE respects any political system”¹²⁸ as long as it produced a government that delivered domestic stability, and did not seek to interfere in the internal affairs of other Arab states (least of all the UAE). Yet, while the UAE may have been agnostic about other Arab states’ political system in principle, it had very clear views about what would work best in practice. This included strong scepticism regarding the viability of democracy in the region, at least in the short- and medium-term. Just as the Emirati government made no pretence that it wanted democracy at home (see the previous chapter), it assessed that there was “enough empirical evidence to suggest that democracy in this part of the world will only empower one group and that is the Islamists.”¹²⁹ From its perspective, multi-party elections in the Arab world — whether in Iraq since 2003, or in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya in the wake of the Arab Uprisings — had only exacerbated societal divisions that could be exploited by groups instrumentalising supra- or subnational identities. Furthermore, the UAE saw democracy as introducing a level of unpredictability about the strategic direction of a country that could jeopardise the implementation of longer-term development agendas.¹³⁰

Yet, it was too simplistic — a convenient “shortcut”¹³¹ — to interpret the UAE’s scepticism towards democracy as a general preference for political systems run by strongmen. The UAE was more comfortable with the notion of authoritarian leaders and/or regimes that were likely to remain in power for a long time, than with the prospect of either democratically elected Islamist governments or territories and populations being left ungoverned and therefore vulnerable to the influence of non-state actors. Illustrative examples for this included the UAE’s support for the 2013 coup in Egypt and subsequent endorsement of President

¹²⁷ Al-Otaiba, “A Conversation,” (RAND Events); Gargash, “Let the Record Show.” Also discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; UAE-based Academic (A), interview with author.

¹²⁸ Binhuwaidin, interview with author.

¹²⁹ Janardhan, interview with author.

¹³⁰ Discussed in interviews with: British Middle East Analyst, interview with author; Emirati Academic (A), interview with author; Hamid, interview with author; Jenkins, interview with author.

¹³¹ UAE-based Academic (B), interview with author.

Al-Sisi;¹³² its backing for the Transitional Military Council in Sudan in 2019;¹³³ and its re-engagement with the regime in Damascus in 2019 and effective embrace of President Al-Assad's narrative that the only alternative to his rule were extremists.¹³⁴ Yet, the UAE did not like all strongmen in the region. Most obvious was its enmity towards Turkey's President Erdogan (who was democratically elected but widely regarded as an increasingly illiberal leader¹³⁵) and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.¹³⁶ But it also opposed leaders such as Gaddafi in Libya, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki in Iraq, President Morsi in Egypt, or Qatar's Emirs, all of whom ruled in authoritarian systems or were regarded as pursuing authoritarian policies despite their electoral mandates. Ultimately, what mattered, from the UAE's perspective, was not the nature of Arab states' political systems, but rather how those in power comported themselves — both in terms of their approaches to domestic governance, and their regional foreign policy, which the UAE wanted to be in alignment with its own agenda.

9. 3. 2. Strong Governments

At a minimum, the UAE considered it the responsibility of governments across the region to maintain sufficient control over their states' territories and populations to prevent drivers of instability from taking hold and/or spreading to other countries. This included containing or pre-empting any popular movements for revolutionary change, particularly when they were joined by (especially Islamist) non-state actors, or promoted by Iran or Turkey/Qatar. Ultimately, the UAE believed that "economic development and prosperity is the catalyst for achieving stability."¹³⁷ By responding to their citizens' socio-

¹³² Sultan S. Al-Qassemi, "Gulf States Embrace Post-Brotherhood Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2013, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/gulf-states-egypt-muslim-brotherhood.html>. [accessed 8 August 2019]. Also discussed in interviews with: Abdulla, interview with author; Former Senior American Diplomat, interview with author.

¹³³ Ramadan Al-Sherbini, "UAE Defends Contacts with Sudan Military," *Gulf News*, 12 June 2019, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-defends-contacts-with-sudan-military-1.1560320572554>. [accessed 23 June 2020]; Reuters, "Arab States Support Sudan Transition, Want Stability: UAE Minister," 1 May 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests-emirates/arab-states-support-sudan-transition-want-stability-uae-minister-idUSKCN1S739G>. [accessed 23 June 2020].

¹³⁴ Reuters, "UAE Praises Syria's Assad for 'Wise Leadership', Cementing Ties," 3 December 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-emirates-relations/uae-praises-syrias-assad-for-wise-leadership-cementing-ties-idUSKBN1Y7100>. [accessed 23 June 2020].

¹³⁵ Soner Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); Hannah Lucinda Smith, *Erdogan Rising: The Battle for the Soul of Turkey* (New York: William Collins, 2019).

¹³⁶ Abdulla, interview with author.

¹³⁷ Alshateri, interview with author.

economic concerns — including, ideally, by being open to international economic cooperation — governments could stave off demands for drastic political change. Moreover, by facilitating economic development and effectively delivering services, governments could prevent non-state actors such as the MB and its affiliates from gaining popular legitimacy by fulfilling state functions. As Al-Otaiba explained, when governments look after their citizens, “the people will ultimately be loyal to them.”¹³⁸ At least in theory, the UAE also had relatively clear views as to what economic development in Arab states could look like, drawing on what it regarded as the strengths of its own socio-economic model. Consequently, it emphasised the need to reduce corruption and increase government transparency, and the importance of reliable regulations to enable and protect investments. It promoted the liberalisation of international trading arrangements, including, for example, with the creation of free trade zones, and encouraged — and participated in — investments in real estate and infrastructure development projects.¹³⁹ The UAE’s efforts to support the Egyptian economy since 2013 were exemplified this: it provided substantial capital, both in the form of aid and investments, and sought to push the government in Cairo to implement structural reforms.¹⁴⁰ Yet, its engagement with Egypt could also be seen as an example of the UAE resigning itself to the fact that other Arab governments, including its close partners, might be unwilling or incapable to institute the necessary reforms for substantial economic development. According to Alshateri, there was a recognition in the UAE that “Egypt might prove a black hole, and no matter how much [...] the Emiratis invest, it will be wasted by graft and corruption.”¹⁴¹

Besides its emphasis on long-term economic development as a key ingredient for state-level stability, the UAE therefore also saw a much more short-termist need for governments to have the coercive abilities to control the public sphere in their countries. Here too, the UAE saw its own approach as a model others could follow. In particular, it saw the state’s ability to monitor, and ultimately control, the flow of information to and amongst its population as critically important for maintaining stability. One interviewee described a “narrative

¹³⁸ Al-Otaiba, “A Conversation,” (RAND Events).

¹³⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Al Qassimi, interview with author; UK-based Political/Economic Analyst, interview with author, 19 February 2019; Young, interview with author.

¹⁴⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Emirati Academic (B), interview with author; UK-based Political/Economic Analyst, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (D), interview with author.

¹⁴¹ Alshateri, interview with author.

tunnel,”¹⁴² a space where the state defines and polices the boundaries and severely punishes any transgressions, but simultaneously allows a degree of freedom of — mostly non-political — expression. Debate and competition are acceptable in social and economic settings, but must not be tolerated in matters related to politics, which the UAE essentially considers as a zero-sum space. In the words of Mohammed bin Zayed, focusing particularly on younger segments of the population, “we must make sure our youth are protected against outlandish ideas and malicious attempts to target them.”¹⁴³ In the context of the contemporary regional environment, this meant that for the UAE, states had to contain — and ideally extinguish — the potential for political mobilisation of religion. To prevent Islamism from destabilising their societies, governments had to establish control over the content of religious discourse in their countries. Ghobash explained that the UAE wanted “to see how we can almost limit the sphere of religion to a healthy realm,”¹⁴⁴ meaning confining religious practice to the personal, private life of citizens, away from politics. The UAE recognised that the mosque as the main physical space “where you can politicise anything;”¹⁴⁵ it therefore did not so much seek to create a separation between the mosque and the state, as to secure the control of the latter over the former. A former senior US diplomat summarised the UAE’s approach as “keeping a very tight rein on those who propagate Islam — so no storefront preachers, no garage preachers, no preachers in the public square.”¹⁴⁶

9. 3. 3. Moderate Islam

Instead, the UAE wanted Arab governments to promote what it considered to be moderate Islam, including, for example, by coordinating the content of Friday sermons,¹⁴⁷ engaging religious institutions such as Egypt’s Al-Azhar, and working through bodies such as the UAE-based Muslim Council of Elders¹⁴⁸ or

¹⁴² US-based Gulf Analyst (D), interview with author.

¹⁴³ M. b. Z. Al-Nahyan, “Statement,” (43rd Anniversary of the UAE National Day).

¹⁴⁴ Ghobash, “Countering Extremist Narratives.”

¹⁴⁵ Janardhan, interview with author.

¹⁴⁶ Former Senior American Diplomat, interview with author.

¹⁴⁷ Freer, interview with author. See also: Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, “The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017), 129-53.

¹⁴⁸ Muslim Council of Elders, “Who We Are,” available at: <https://www.muslim-elders.com/en/page/7/who-we-are>. [accessed 20 June 2020]; Samir Salama, “Muslim Council of Elders Set up in Abu Dhabi,” *Gulf News*, 20 July 2014, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/muslim-council-of-elders-set-up-in-abu-dhabi-1.1361897>. [accessed 20 June 2020]; See also: Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy.”

the Hedayah Center.¹⁴⁹ The theological intricacies of how the UAE defined moderate Islam are beyond the scope of this thesis.¹⁵⁰ With regard to stability, however, it was clear that “what they mean by moderate is essentially apolitical,”¹⁵¹ for religion and religious differences to be immaterial to political decisions. Ideally, and as amplified in the UAE itself, this is translated into inter-religious dialogue and tolerance towards the practice of other faiths, displayed in events such as Pope Francis’ visit to Abu Dhabi in 2019; the implementation of business-friendly socio-economic reforms, for example in areas such as women’s participation workplace; and a state’s freedom to build and maintain strategic bilateral relationships with countries like China or Israel unencumbered by religious sensitivities around the treatment of the Uyghur in the former, or the latter’s status as a Jewish state.¹⁵² In its most basic terms, however, the UAE’s conception of moderate Islam seemed to extend not much further than “a zero-tolerance approach to the [Muslim] Brotherhood.”¹⁵³ In Yemen and Libya, for example, the UAE’s cooperation with conservative Salafi groups suggested that the primary criteria was not so their much tolerance towards other faiths, but rather their repudiation of political revolutions and a quietist adherence to political authorities the UAE supported.¹⁵⁴

As noted in the previous chapter, in addition to its rejection of political revolutions, the UAE genuinely regarded MB-style political Islam as anathema to the kind of socio-economic development it considered conducive to state-level stability. From its perspective, “every regime that adopted political Islam as an ideology is a failure,” particularly economically, with examples including Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Hamas’ rule of the Gaza Strip since 2007, and the Morsi-presidency in Egypt in 2012-2013. As Ghobash put it,

¹⁴⁹ Akhbar Alsaa, “Active Role in Combating Extremism and Terrorism,” *The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research*, 9 April 2013, available at: https://www.ecssr.ae/en/reports_analysis/active-role-in-combating-extremism-and-terrorism/. [accessed 20 June 2020]; Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. “Pope, UAE Build Bridges to Take on Ideology of Hate and Terror,” *CNN*, 15 September 2016, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/15/opinions/pope-uae-meeting-terror/index.html> [Accessed 11 May 2018]; Hedayah Center, “About Hedayah,” available at: <https://www.hedayahcenter.org>. [accessed 20 June 2020].

¹⁵⁰ For more on the subject see for example: Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, *Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2018).

¹⁵¹ Freer, interview with author.

¹⁵² Discussed in interviews with: Freer, interview with author; Hamid, interview with author; UAE-based Political Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 28 August 2018. See also: Panos Kourgiotis, “Moderate Islam’ Made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment,” *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020).

¹⁵³ Hamid, interview with author.

¹⁵⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Freer, interview with author; UK-based Libya Analyst, phone interview with author. See also: Salisbury, “Risk Perception.”

“proselytising ideology is no substitute for creating opportunity.”¹⁵⁵ For the UAE, the fact that international pressures and sanction regimes had affected the economic records of Islamist governments (most obviously in the case of Iran) only confirmed — rather than explained — their inability to create political environments for effective economic development.¹⁵⁶ Ultimately, however, the UAE’s insistence that political Islam and stability were incompatible was primarily tied to its assessment that wherever Islamists gained political power, or were afforded with a public platform, they posed a threat to the stability of other states, including the UAE itself. Emirati leaders “strongly believe in the idea of a domino effect”¹⁵⁷ and that “any country of political Islamic inclination will be a safe haven for Islamists from all over the region.”¹⁵⁸ At the heart of this conception was, once again, the Emirati view that governments in the region had to delineate the political identities of their states from the MENA’s pervasive supranational influences. This applied to Islamism, in particular, but also to political ideas more generally. As one Emirati academic noted, “remember that the Arab Spring started in a tiny very far away country and eventually reached the Gulf.”¹⁵⁹ For governments to control the public spheres in their countries, from the UAE’s perspective, therefore entailed both defending themselves against destabilising external influences, and protecting others from potential spillover coming from within their own borders.

In sum, the UAE’s conception of stability at the state-level was characterised by an emphasis on governments and states’ abilities to exercise control. Ideally, and following the UAE’s example, governments needed to facilitate long-term economic development and provide their citizens with rising living standards, thereby fostering “that bond between the people and their leadership”¹⁶⁰ that forestalled any revolutionary momentum. Further, to contain ideational and regional drivers of instability, the UAE thought it essential that governments had control over the public spheres in their countries and were able to curtail any transnational (especially Islamist) tendencies amongst their populations. While the UAE was in principle agnostic towards the political systems of other states,

¹⁵⁵ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “The Moderate Middle East Must Act,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 2014, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/yousef-al-otaiba-the-moderate-middle-east-must-act-1410304537>. [accessed 17 June 2020].

¹⁵⁶ Ghobash, “Countering Extremist Narratives”; Ghobash, “Islam and Democracy.”

¹⁵⁷ UAE-based Academic (B), interview with author.

¹⁵⁸ Alshateri, interview with author.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Al-Otaiba, “The Middle East at an Inflection Point.”

in practice it regarded its own form of “benign autocracy”¹⁶¹ as the most effective form of government in the region. In fact, in a strategic environment as dangerous and unstable as that of the MENA during the 2010s, the UAE saw the key to stability in governments’ abilities to guarantee a modicum of continuity. A former senior British diplomat argued that the UAE’s conception of state-level stability could be encapsulated in a paraphrase of 13th-century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah: “better a thousand years of autocracy, than one night without a strong ruler.”¹⁶²

9. 4. Conclusion

The UAE’s conception of stability in the MENA was defined by its confidence in the virtues of its own political and socio-economic governance model. To an extent, it therefore believed that stability would ultimately be “achieved by making the Middle East more like the UAE.”¹⁶³ Based on its perception of the deep-rooted nature of many of the drivers of instability in the region, the UAE saw the need for change in the MENA, including at the level of individual states, in the organisation of the regional order, and in how external actors engaged with the region — as Gargash put it, “the world is changing, you can’t stay where you are.”¹⁶⁴

Domestically, the UAE believed, Arab governments had to prioritise economic development, rather than political reform, and — critically — focus on “extinguishing support for political Islam.”¹⁶⁵ Where governments were incapable or unwilling to take the necessary steps to provide their populations with sufficient economic opportunities to prevent them from mobilising and agitating for change, they at least needed to have the coercive capabilities to contain their discontent. From the UAE’s perspective, this required monitoring information flows and curtailing the spread of revolutionary political ideologies, of which it considers Islamism to be the most prevalent in the region. In the context of the literature dealing with stability as a theoretical concept outlined in Chapter 3, the UAE’s understanding of stability therefore revolved primarily around notions of the longevity of governments and political systems and their

¹⁶¹ Richards, interview with author.

¹⁶² Jenkins, interview with author.

¹⁶³ Kinninmont, interviews with author.

¹⁶⁴ Hokayem, interview with author.

¹⁶⁵ UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

ability to maintain legitimacy or acquiescence by managing change.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps most obviously, however, it contained a strong belief that processes of political transition were moments of exceptional vulnerability — an idea familiar from the fragile states literature¹⁶⁷ — and could therefore not be left to (electoral) chance, and instead had to be delayed until states were strong enough to contain any ideology-driven popular movements.

At the regional level, the UAE wanted Arab states to assert leadership. Aware of its limitations as a relatively small state, the UAE sought to construct a regional leadership triangle — effectively a regional power concert¹⁶⁸ — consisting of itself, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Through this alliance it hoped to both exercise a degree of influence over the internal developments and regional policies of these traditional Arab powers, and to harness their strengths in support of its own regional agenda. The UAE saw the need to seize the initiative from Iran and Turkey, which it regarded as trying to increase their regional influence and undermine the region's status quo state system by promoting revisionist, transitional, revolutionary and Islamist political projects. Yet, the UAE also remained fundamentally pragmatic, willing to engage in short-term tactical dialogue, particularly with Iran, to avoid major regional conflict that would inevitably harm Emirati national security and economic interests. In fact, throughout, and most obviously demonstrated in the normalisation of relations with Israel, the UAE ultimately favoured a regional order in which economic and strategic alignment amongst governments prevailed over ideological differences.

A similar pragmatism was apparent in the UAE's views regarding the involvement of external powers in the MENA. It saw the continuing engagement of the USA as critically important to its national security and the region's stability, but was also comfortable with the notion of a more diverse set of global powers pursuing their strategic interests in the region. Confident in its strengths

¹⁶⁶ All aspects highlighted in the reviews by Hurwitz and Dowding and Kimber: Keith M. Dowding and Richard Kimber "The Meaning and Use of 'Political Stability'," *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983), 229-243; Leon Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability," *Comparative Politics* 5, no 3 (1973), 449-463.

¹⁶⁷ See for example: Peter Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (London: Vintage Books, 2009); Roland Paris, *After War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶⁸ This is familiar from the typologies of regional orders Lake and Morgan and Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll outlined in Chapter 3: Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), 731-753; David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997).

as both a military and economic power, it saw an opportunity in positioning itself as the primary regional interlocutor for both the USA and European states, and for China, Russia and others. From this position, it hoped to be able to influence their regional policies in support of its own regional agenda.

Ultimately, however, the perhaps most distinguishing feature of the UAE's conception of stability in the MENA was the emphasis on control. At the state-level, this meant that the UAE considered stability as fundamentally contingent upon the ability of political authorities to "to control the process [of change] from the top down."¹⁶⁹ At the regional and international level, it sought to ensure a level of influence for itself to avoid running "the risk of having politics not going their way."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁷⁰ Hokayem, interview with author.

10. Qatar's Perception of the Strategic Environment

With the People, against the Counter-Revolution

Qatar experienced the 2010s akin to a roller-coaster ride. In 2011, then-Emir Hamad bin Khalifa enthusiastically spoke of the “blossoming of the Arab Spring”¹ in which populations across the Arab world were changing the region for the better. But as the decade progressed, his son and successor, Tamim bin Hamad, described how this “yearning of the young people [...] was eclipsed by contemptuous power politics.”² Finally, after the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis in 2017, when a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to isolate Qatar politically and economically, the leadership in Doha felt that their own country had come under attack in a region that was “governed by the law of the jungle.”³ Throughout, Qatari leaders emphasised their assessment that the MENA had fundamentally changed in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman expounded in 2016: “There is no denying the fact that the Arab Spring and the counter revolutions that followed have turned the Middle East upside down. In fact, the events of the last five years have resulted to the most significant changes in the political and geographical landscape of the Middle East since the Sykes Picot Agreement.”⁴

This chapter examines Qatar's perception of the strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s. It argues that Qatar's optimism and enthusiastic support for sweeping political change in many — though not all — Arab countries gradually gave way to frustration and disappointment, culminating in a view that Qatar itself had become a victim of counter-revolutionary regional powers. Throughout, Qatar saw the unwise or nefarious decision of other

¹ Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, “Speech of the State of Qatar by His Highness Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 21 September 2011), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/66/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

² Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Qatar's Message to Obama.” *The New York Times*, 24 February 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/opinion/qatars-message-to-obama.html>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

³ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 19 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁴ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “S R Nathan Distinguished Lecture 2016,” (speech, Middle East Institute, St Regis University, Singapore, 6 October 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSS-mk5mHac> [accessed 25 June 2020].

governments, both of countries in the region and beyond, as responsible for the deterioration of order and stability in the region. Meanwhile, Qatar regarded itself as a country with a vision for a better future for the MENA that stood steadfastly with the will of the people of the region and therefore, in its view, on the right side of history.

10. 1. The Big Picture Narrative

Qatar's big picture narrative of the MENA in the 2010s depicted the region as divided into two main camps: On one side stood "the people"⁵ of the Arab world, bravely demanding political freedom and economic opportunity, striving to change their countries, and the region as a whole, for the better. They were supported by a small number of countries, including Qatar itself and Turkey. Tamim bin Hamad confirmed in 2013 that "yes, the State of Qatar has aligned itself with the issues of the Arab peoples and their aspiration to live freely and with dignity away from corruption and despotism."⁶ The other side consisted of an array of actors that Qatar considered to be part of "the counter-revolution."⁷ This encompassed some Arab governments responding to popular demands for change with violence; old or new political forces that Qatar did not agree with and that (re)asserted themselves (or sought to) in the wake of the Arab Uprisings; and several regional powers backing them, including Iran, which supported the Syrian regime, for example, but most of all — certainly after 2017 — the governments of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As the decade progressed, Qatar increasingly saw the latter camp pushing the MENA into ever-deeper instability, seeking to crush the will of the people, fomenting regional polarisation, and eventually turning against Qatar to punish it "for supporting the

⁵ Qatari leaders have emphasised their support for "the people" of the MENA throughout the decade; see for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, "What Season Is Next for the Middle East?" (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 2 February 2014), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2014/video/panel-discussion-what-season-is-next-for-the-middle-east/filter/video/> [accessed 25 June 2020]; H. b. K. Al-Thani, "Speech"; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "Lunch Debate with Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani," (speech, World Policy Conference, Marrakesh, 3 November 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-R0wQ55ub-0> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁶ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "The Inaugural Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Amir of Qatar on Becoming the Amir," *Government Communications Office*, 26 June 2013, available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁷ Al-Thani, Tamim bin Hamad, "A Conversation with His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani," (speech, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 26 February 2015), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/engagements/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

true aspirations of people against tyrants and dictators.”⁸ In this environment, in addition to its — first enthusiastic, then defiant — alignment with “the Arab peoples,”⁹ Qatar described itself as “a bedrock of stability in a sea of turmoil,”¹⁰ that would not bend to its neighbours’ unjust pressure.

Qatar did not anticipate the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11,¹¹ but quickly embraced them as a historic moment for the region. In its view, the people of the region were asserting themselves, revealing the unsustainability of the status quo in many Arab countries. According to then-Foreign- and Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “the rules of play in the region have changed radically”¹² — both with regard to domestic politics and regional relations. One senior Qatari diplomat interviewed for this thesis likened the uprisings to “a natural phenomenon like an earthquake” and concluded that “whether you like it or not doesn’t matter; what matters is how we deal with it.”¹³ Even as the popular protests evolved into violent conflicts in Libya and Syria or uneasy political transitions as in Egypt or Yemen, Qatar retained its outwardly displayed optimism that the people would ultimately prevail. Hamad bin Khalifa told the 2012 UN General Assembly that the region was “passing through a very difficult and risky period, which, at the same time, is full of hope;”¹⁴ and Khalid Al-Attiyah (Foreign Minister from 2013-2016 and Minister of State for Defence since 2016) said in 2014: “in the end of the day, the change will prevail [...] It will take us ten years of this yo-yo game thing. Things will settle down and democracy will reveal in the Middle East.”¹⁵ (What Qatar meant by democracy is discussed in the next chapter.)

⁸ Meshal bin Hamad Al-Thani, “The Blockade on Qatar Is a Smokescreen. Here’s What’s Behind It,” *The Washington Post*, 22 June 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/22/the-blockade-on-qatar-is-a-smokescreen-heres-whats-behind-it/?utm_term=.43b2bac7dbaf [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁹ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech.”

¹⁰ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Qatar’s Message.”

¹¹ Discussed in interviews with: Jane Kinnimont (Head of Programmes, The Elders), interview with author, 4 April 2019; Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 23 March 2018; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author, 27 February 2019; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Baker Institute Fellow, Rice University), phone interview with author, 1 April 2019.

¹² Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Qatar’s Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani,” interview by Ibrahim Mohamed, *Journal Interview*, 21 April 2013, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF7tAheBEQ> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹³ Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author, 9 April 2018.

¹⁴ Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, “Speech of the State of Qatar by His Highness Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 25 September 2012), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/67/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹⁵ Al-Attiyah, “What Season Is Next.”

In Qatar's narrative, the uprisings were the result of Arab governments having failed to pay "adequate attention"¹⁶ to their citizens' demands for economic development and political participation. This assessment also allowed the conclusion that the absence of protests in Qatar meant that its government had got it right. It argued that leadership in Doha, but also the region's other monarchies in the Gulf and in Jordan and Morocco, had been more attuned and responsive to the will of their people.¹⁷ Support for, and coverage on Al-Jazeera of, anti-government protests in some of these countries — especially Bahrain — was notably absent from the Qatari narrative in the early part of the decade.¹⁸ Only after the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis in 2017 did Qatari leaders openly accuse some of their fellow Gulf monarchies of also repressing their people. According to Mohammed bin Abdulrahman: "our neighbours see change, those advocating for it, and those reporting on it as a threat and they are equipped to label anyone who opposes their governments as a terrorist."¹⁹

Even before 2017, however, Qatar had identified an ever-longer list of actors that it regarded as either not doing enough to support positive change in the MENA, or being part of the counter-revolutionary current in the region. Both were, in its view, contributing to worsening regional instability.

Qatar accused the international community, writ large, of not grasping the importance of what was going on in the MENA. It claimed that manifested itself either in irresponsible negligence (e.g. not decisively intervening against the Syrian regime), or the wrong kind of intervention (e.g. focusing on Daesh, rather than stopping the violence perpetrated by Syrian regime forces).²⁰ Although Qatar usually avoided explicitly naming individual countries, much of its criticism was clearly directed at the main members of the UN Security Council, and

¹⁶ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, "Special Address, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor Al-Thani," (speech, World Economic Forum 2011, Dead Sea, 22 October 2011), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD875jb1tiM> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹⁷ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, "Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani," interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 2 February 2012, available at: <https://charlierose.com/videos/15173> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹⁸ David B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State* (London: Hurst & CO, 2017), 128-131.

¹⁹ Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "The Crisis in the Gulf: Qatar Responds," (speech, Chatham House, London, 5 July 2017), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/file/crisis-gulf-qatar-responds> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²⁰ This is a frequent theme; see for example: H. b. K. Al-Thani, "Speech"; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar," (speech, General Debate of the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 20 September 2016), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/71/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar," (speech, General Debate of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2019), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/74/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

especially the USA. While always insisting on the strong and strategic nature of US-Qatari bilateral relations, Qatar saw Washington's regional policies as problematic. The Iraq war had destabilised the regional order, sowing sectarianism and empowering Iran — in Hamad bin Jassim's words, the USA had given Iraq "to the Iranian on a silver plate."²¹ The Obama administration's approach to the region was too inconsistent and too cautious (especially in Syria), and not consultative enough (e.g. with regard to the JCPOA).²² Finally, the Trump administration was also inconsistent and was taking its advice from the wrong regional voices (especially Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia).²³

In Qatar's narrative, the lack of decisiveness and clarity from the international community enabled a regional environment in which "the forces which rejected the path of reform and gradual, peaceful transition, and confronted the people with arms"²⁴ were empowered. Initially, this referred to the governments that were violently resisting their people's demands for change, especially the Syrian regime and its Iranian backers.²⁵ But as the decade progressed, "those [who] countered the revolution"²⁶ in Qatar's view, came to include several others: the government of Abdulfatah Al-Sisi that came to power after "the coup that happened in Egypt"²⁷ in 2013, the political and military factions around Khalifa Haftar in Libya, the alliance of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis in Yemen,²⁸ and — eventually — the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. Between 2013-2017, Qatari leaders had occasionally hinted that their

²¹ Al-Thani, Hamad bin Jassim, "The MENA Region after the Iran Nuclear Deal," (speech, Chatham House, London, 19 November 2015), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/mena-region-after-iran-nuclear-deal> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²² See for example: Khalid Al-Attayah, "Is This the End of the Middle East (as We Know It)?" (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 8 February 2015), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2015/video/panel-discussion-is-this-the-end-of-the-middle-east-as-we-know-it-1/filter/video/> [accessed 25 June 2020]; H. b. J. "The MENA Region."

²³ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, "Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani," interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 12 June 2017, available at: <https://charlierose.com/videos/30589> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²⁴ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani "Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar," (speech, Opening of the Advisory Council 43rd Session, Doha, 11 November 2014), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²⁵ For example: Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, "Mali, Syria and Beyond: Dealing with the Current Crisis," (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 3 February 2013), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2013/video/panel-discussion-mali-syria-and-beyond-dealing-with-the-current-crises/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²⁶ Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author, 16 April 2018.

²⁷ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "CNN Interview," interview by Christiane Amanpour, *CNN*, 25 September 2014, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH82IUNh8PY> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²⁸ For references to both Libya and Yemen, as well as Iraq and Syria see for example: T. b. H. Al-Thani, "Speech," (Opening of the Advisory Council 43rd Session).

neighbours were aiding the counter-revolution in some countries,²⁹ but following the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis in 2017 they explicitly framed them as its primary leaders. One senior Qatari academic explained that by the end of the decade, Qatar recognised that many of the uprisings had failed to achieve their aims and concluded “that the Saudis and the UAE manufactured that failure.”³⁰ They had attacked Qatar for standing with the region’s populations and refusing to subscribe to their counter-revolutionary agenda. In Qatar’s view, Arab-, or at least Gulf-Arab unity should have provided the basis for responsible regional leadership in the MENA.³¹ Instead, governments across the region, and specifically those in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, had only pursued their selfish “thirst for power,”³² fomenting and exacerbating civil conflicts and driving dangerous regional polarisation, including between the Gulf monarchies and Iran and Turkey, respectively. According to one senior Qatari diplomat, “there is a sense of un-responsibility, there is a sense of impunity by these countries. They think they can rule the world, rule the region.”³³

Throughout Qatar’s narrative about developments in the MENA during the 2010s, it is notable that it has mostly apportioned blame for conflicts, violence and instability in the region to the decisions and actions of governments, both in the regions and beyond. Qatar also regarded non-state actors, particularly those with violent extremist agendas, as dangerous. It clearly saw Daesh as a threat, for example, with Hamad bin Jassim saying in 2017: “If they finish with Syria, they will come to us. We know that.”³⁴ It also accused Iranian-sponsored militias in Iraq, Haftar’s forces in Libya, and the Houthis in Yemen of undermining the integrity of their respective states — though it adopted a more sympathetic tone towards the latter after being pushed out of the Saudi-led

²⁹ In September 2016, for example, the Emir noted that some countries were supporting Haftar’s forces that had just forcefully taken control over the oil terminals in the east of the country—a thinly veiled hint at the UAE. See: T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness,” (71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

³⁰ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author, 3 April 2018.

³¹ Between 2011 and 2017 Qatari leaders frequently argued that Arab countries had a responsibility to resolve the conflicts in the region themselves, both in the international media and in speeches at regional summits: H. b. J. Al-Thani, “Prime Minister”; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech by His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 36th GCC Summit, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 9 December 2015), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, Council of the Arab League, the 28th Ordinary Session, Amman, 29 March 2017), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

³² Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Opening Statement,” (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 15 February 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6G4pYd6hOE> [accessed 25 June 2020].

³³ Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author.

³⁴ H. b. J. Al-Thani, “Hamad Bin Jassim.”

coalition against them in 2017.³⁵ In general, however, where non-state actors were not openly hostile to Qatar or its partners, Qatari leaders generally argued for engaging them in dialogue to prevent or reverse their radicalisation.³⁶ They consistently described non-state actors — including jihadi terrorist groups — as only able to emerge as significant threats to stability in environments of unresolved conflict and where people were subject to violent repression from political authorities. Talking about the war in Syria, Khalid Al-Attiyah said in 2012: “the more we delay solving this, the more fanatics are building in Syria, this is a fact;”³⁷ two years later he assessed that “terrorists in Syria only flourished in the swamp of violence created by the regime.”³⁸

In sum, in Qatar’s narrative, the strategic environment of the MENA during the 2010s was characterised by a central dichotomy between the virtuous people of the region, who Qatar itself was standing with, and a range of malign regimes only interested in their own domestic and regional power. One Qatari academic argued that Qatar’s perception and depiction of the Arab Uprisings, and the very concept of popularly-driven change in the region, had been “quite idealistic,”³⁹ but that the Gulf Crisis had hardened the government’s resolve to portray the country as defiantly standing on what they considered the right side of history.

10. 2. Drivers of Instability and Disorder

Qatar’s narrative during the 2010s consistently — and since 2017, defiantly — portrayed the Arab Uprisings as a positive development for the MENA. Safe in the knowledge that protests were highly unlikely to spread to Qatar itself, the

³⁵ See for example: T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (Opening of the Advisory Council 43rd Session); Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 26th Arab League Summit, Sharm El-Sheikh, 28 March 2015), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (28th Arab League Summit)

³⁶ See for example: Al-Attiyah, “What Season Is Next?”; Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Discussion with Qatar’s Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Dr Khalid Bin Mohammad Al-Attiyah,” (speech, New York University Model United Nations, New York, 1 October 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yy4IY6xa-5s> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVXhk-aL9A0> [accessed 25 June 2020]; H. b. J. Al-Thani, “Prime Minister.”

³⁷ Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Priorities for Regional Security,” (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 8 December 2012), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2012-f58e/second-plenary-session-f3e9/dr-khalid-bin-mohammad-al-attiyah-e5f5> [accessed 25 June 2020].

³⁸ Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Qatari Foreign Policy Today: Challenges and Opportunities,” (speech, Princeton University, Princeton, 29 September 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f-kWq2sbhU> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Growing Rifts, Power Shifts? The New Geopolitics of the Middle East,” (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 14 February 2016), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2016/video/panel-discussion-and-comment-growing-rifts-power-shifts-the-new-geopolitics-of-the-middle-east/filter/video/> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Statement,” (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 17 February 2019), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2MD_ieTM6k [accessed 25 June 2020].

³⁹ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

leadership in Doha felt “comfortable with the pace and direction of change”⁴⁰ signalled by the Uprisings, at least at the beginning of the decade. Yet, as the decade progressed, conflicts intensified and spread, and Qatar itself came under attack from its neighbours, government representatives also described the MENA as “a region of turmoil and instability.”⁴¹ There was no comprehensive summary of factors Qatar considered to be the most important drivers of regional instability. But taking into account publicly available statements made by Qatari leaders and officials throughout the decade and interviews conducted for this thesis, and analysing these in the context of the existing literature, it is possible to identify three main sets of factors that characterised Qatar’s perception of instability in the MENA. They relate to state-level governance, the foreign policy behaviour of regional powers, and the international community, respectively. Throughout, as reflected in its big picture narrative outlined above, Qatar focused on the decisions and actions of governments as the decisive variables shaping regional developments.

10. 2. 1. Government Failure and Repression

In Qatar’s understanding, the Arab Uprisings were a reaction to the political and socio-economic governance failures of many Arab governments. Qatar acknowledged the socio-economic challenges countries across the regions were facing — including growing populations, unemployment, rising food prices, increasing inequality and corruption — but saw the inability or unwillingness of governments to deal with these issues as the decisive driver of instability, rather than the factors themselves.⁴² According to Hamad bin Jassim, domestic instability occurred where political leaderships did not “know the pulse of the street”⁴³ and had failed to “ensure decent living for all citizens.”⁴⁴ Qatar saw the lack of economic development in many Arab countries, and, more specifically, popular perceptions that governments were not doing enough to improve living standards for large segments of their societies, as more important than factors

⁴⁰ Ulrichsen, interview with author.

⁴¹ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “End the Blockade of Qatar,” *The New York Times*, 5 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/opinion/qatar-blockade-foreign-minister.html>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁴² See for example: Ahmed bin Mohammed Al-Thani, “Welcoming Remarks,” (speech, US-Islamic World Forum, Doha, 9 June 2013) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMAoLBVM5ok> [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Opening Statement.”

⁴³ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani,” interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 13 May 2014, available at: <https://charlierose.com/videos/17340> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁴⁴ H. b. J. Al-Thani, “Special Address.”

related to political freedoms and rights. In an interview, a senior Qatari diplomat said: “Honestly, I think that had many of those regimes applied real reforms and improved the economic conditions of the people, people would have been less keen about democracy.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Qatar has also tied instability to at least the style — if not necessarily the system — of political leadership in Arab states.

As the decade progressed, the Qatari narrative increasingly highlighted government repression and the lack of political inclusivity as key drivers of instability in the region;⁴⁶ one Qatari professor concluded simply that “all the problems come from the dictatorship.”⁴⁷ Considering Qatar’s own autocratic system of government, the notion that it saw the lack of political freedom as a problem may appear contradictory. It was, however, consistent with Qatar’s perception of its government as benevolent, responsive to its citizens’ demands, and tolerant of some criticism — albeit within strictly defined boundaries (i.e. not directly at the Emir and his family).⁴⁸ This self-perception is analysed in the next section. Qatar saw the refusal of governments to afford their populations enough space to at least express their grievances without fear of immediate repression as breeding radicalisation. In 2011, it therefore saw the violent crackdowns against protesters by some governments in the region — especially in Syria — as the deceive driver of instability, rather than the protests themselves.⁴⁹ From Qatar’s perspective, the increasing extremism of some elements in the Syrian opposition, for example, was primarily a function of a backlash against the violence meted out by Damascus. It even considered it possible for groups such as the Al-Nusra Front (which later became Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham) to moderate its views and behaviour if it were to be included in

⁴⁵ Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author.

⁴⁶ See for example: Lolwah Al-Khater, “Priorities and Challenges for the Gulf: Peace, Security, and Mitigating Conflict,” interview by Anne Patterson, *Women’s Foreign Policy Group*, 26 March 2019, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MS_Yhqybmw [accessed 25 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech by His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 35th GCC Summit, Doha, 9 December 2014), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁴⁷ Qatari Academic (C), interview with author, 8 April 2018.

⁴⁸ Andreas Krieg (Assistant Professor, King’s College London), interview with author, 14 February 2019; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author; Ulrichsen, interview with author.

⁴⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author; Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author. See also: Al-Attayah, “Priorities for Regional Security”; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Changing Dynamics in the Gulf,” (speech, American Enterprise Institute, Washington DC, 1 February 2018), available at: <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/180202-AEI-Changing-Dynamics-in-the-Gulf.pdf?x91208> [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (Opening of the Advisory Council 43rd Session).

a political process.⁵⁰ (This Qatari insistence on inclusiveness is discussed further in the following chapter.) “The root causes of terrorism,” according to Tamim bin Hamad, were “conditions of despair, lack of any way out, and loss of hope in reform through peaceful means.”⁵¹

Related to this, and also frequently referring to the war in Syria as an illustrative example, Qatar also saw governments’ domestic repression as eventually leading to regional and international instability. In 2015, Tamim bin Hamad assessed that the war in Syria had “extended beyond the Syrian and regional boundaries to pose a threat to global security and stability.”⁵² This is the context in which Qatar understood international terrorism (e.g. perpetrated by Daesh) as a driver of regional instability. It consistently described terrorism as “one of the most serious threats to our Arab region.”⁵³ But it ultimately considered it a second-order effect of conflicts that were caused by the violent repression of popular grievances by governments in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, and exacerbated by regional competition,⁵⁴ and external interference (and non-interference).⁵⁵

10. 2. 2. Regional Competition: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE

The second major set of factors that Qatar perceived as driving instability in the MENA during the 2010s were the foreign policies of several regional powers, specifically Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Besides the Arab governments trying to violently suppress their populations’ demands for change, Qatar considered Tehran, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to be the leaders of the counter-revolutionary current in the region. It saw them as providing support for illegitimate regimes, and as the main protagonists in a “game of power”⁵⁶ driving

⁵⁰ See for example: Al-Attiyah, “Discussion with Qatar’s Minister of Foreign Affairs.” For accounts of Qatar’s engagement Syrian opposition groups, including some linked to AQ, see for example: Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (London: Yale University Press, 2016); David B. Roberts, “A Dustup in the Gulf,” *Foreign Affairs*, 13 June 2017, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-06-13/dustup-gulf>. [accessed 24 June 2020].

⁵¹ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (36th GCC Summit).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (28th Arab League Summit).

⁵⁴ Qatari leaders and officials have often expressed their view that regional competition, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran is fuelling proxy wars: M. b. A. Al-Thani, “Statement”; Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author.

⁵⁵ See for example: Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “How the UN Can Save Aleppo,” *The New York Times*, 12 October 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/13/opinion/how-the-un-can-save-aleppo.html>. [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (28th Arab League Summit).

⁵⁶ M. b. A. Al-Thani, “A View from Qatar,” (speech, Mediterranean Dialogues, Rome, 2 December 2017), available at: <https://rome-med.org/speeches/a-view-from-qatar/> [accessed 26 June 2020].

regional disorder.⁵⁷ Notably, Qatar did not consider itself to be part of this competition, nor did it regard its own regional policies, or those of its close partner Turkey, as contributing to regional instability. Instead, it portrayed itself and Ankara as supporting the legitimate demands of the Arab people, and consistently defended Turkey's interventions against Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria and on the side of the Government of National Accord in Libya towards the end of the decade. Qatari officials described these as defending Turkish national security, and providing support for a government under siege by counter-revolutionary forces (led by Haftar and supported by the UAE and others), respectively.⁵⁸ Qatar also maintained that its Al-Jazeera network, which many other governments in the region accused of inciting instability,⁵⁹ was "an independent source of information for millions of people in the Arabian Peninsula and around the world."⁶⁰ At the same time, it considered the way other governments in the region — again, specifically those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE — were using the media (and social media) to be destabilising, accusing them of purposefully spreading misinformation, particularly since 2017.⁶¹

Qatar generally maintained a constructive bilateral relationship with Iran, centred around the countries' shared gas field and, since 2017, access to Iranian airspace for planes flying in and out of Qatar.⁶² But it also consistently viewed Iran's regional foreign policy as fomenting or exacerbating instability. According to Hamad bin Jassim, "Iran is shaking the stability of the region by doing things in Yemen, in Syria, in Lebanon and Iraq."⁶³ In January 2016, Qatar

⁵⁷ See for example: M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Statement"; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar," (speech Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session, Doha, 14 November 2017), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁵⁸ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiah, "Fireside Chat," interview by Steven Clemons (Global Security Forum, Doha, 16 October 2019), available at: <https://youtu.be/aAC-5E3if0Q> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Lolwah Al-Khater, "Fireside Chat," interview by Kimberly Dozier (Global Security Forum, Doha, 15 October 2019), available at: <https://youtu.be/aAC-5E3if0Q> [accessed 25 June 2020]; M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Changing Dynamics."

⁵⁹ See, for example, Chapters 5 and 6 in this thesis about Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

⁶⁰ Yousef Al-Khater, "Qatar's Crisis Can Only End If We Sit Down Together and Resolve It as Brothers," *The Telegraph*, 5 July 2017, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/05/qatars-crisis-can-end-sit-together-resolve-brothers/>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁶¹ Mohammed Jaham Al-Kuwari, "'Understood' and 'Misunderstood': A Conversation with H.E. Mohammed Jaham Al Kuwari," (speech, National Council on US Arab Relations, Washington DC, 1 April 2014) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iu8R7C9mBac> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "Fireside Chat," interview by Ali Velshi (Global Security Forum, Doha, 15 October 2019), available at: https://youtu.be/pMKoXKT_9pA [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁶² See for example: Sébastien Boussois, "Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 216-32; Roberts, *Qatar*.

⁶³ H. b. J. Al-Thani, "Hamad Bin Jassim."

withdrew its ambassador from Tehran and joined its neighbours in the GCC in condemning an attack on Saudi Arabia's diplomatic representation in Iran.⁶⁴ The ambassador was returned in August 2017, shortly after the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis.⁶⁵ This did not mean that it no longer considered Iranian activities in the region to be problematic, but it signalled a shift in focus in Qatar's perception of the regional environment: It now saw — and openly portrayed — the states behind “the blockade”⁶⁶ as the main forces driving instability in the MENA.

As noted above, even before 2017 Qatari officials occasionally hinted at their view that their fellow GCC members were pursuing what they considered to be the wrong objectives in the region. This included Saudi Arabia and the UAE's backing for the overthrow of the Morsi government in Egypt in 2013, and the latter's support for Haftar in Libya since 2014; their decisions to designate the MB a terrorist organisation;⁶⁷ and their efforts in 2013-2014 to pressure Qatar into aligning its foreign policy with their own.⁶⁸ In fact, Qatar had long seen Saudi Arabia, in particular, as a key source of instability in the region and a potential (and actual) threat to its own national security. This had at least three main dimensions, all of which were reinforced by developments during the 2010s: Firstly, Qatar had long worried about the potential for significant domestic instability in Saudi Arabia. The Arab Uprisings and their aftermath brought this into stark relief for Qatari leaders. They knew that Qatar could hardly isolate itself if Saudi Arabia were to descend into internal chaos.⁶⁹ Given how much agency Qatar attributes to governments in preventing domestic instability, they have therefore very closely watched the reform programme presided over by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.⁷⁰ Secondly,

⁶⁴ Robert Anderson, “Qatar Withdraws Its Ambassador to Iran,” *Gulf Business*, 7 January 2016, available at: <https://gulfbusiness.com/qatar-withdraws-ambassador-to-iran/>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁶⁵ Al-Jazeera, “Iran Welcomes Return of the Qatari Ambassador [إيران ترحب بعودة السفير القطري]”, 24 August 2017, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2017/8/24/إيران-ترحب-بعودة-السفير-القطري>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁶⁶ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁶⁷ See for example: Al-Attiyah, “Qatari Foreign Policy Today.”

⁶⁸ For accounts of the 2013/14 Gulf Crisis see: Roberts, *Qatar*; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020).

⁶⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Jens Heibach (Research Fellow, GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, Hamburg), interview with author, 15 August 2018; Mehran Kamrava (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 11 April 2018; Hans-Udo Muzel (Ambassador of Germany to the State of Qatar), interview with author, 11 April 2018; Haoues Taguia (Researcher, Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha), interview with author, 2 April 2018.

⁷⁰ Both before and after the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis, Qatari leaders have expressed support for Saudi Arabia's domestic reform programme, emphasising the importance of an internally stable Saudi Arabia for the region. See for example: Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Exclusive Interview,” interview by Marc Perelman, *France 24*, 17 September 2018, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXCi7NsDmTc> [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “A Conversation.”

Saudi Arabia's dominance on the Arabian side of the Gulf had always made it the greatest potential destabiliser for Qatar's own borders, its immediate neighbourhood, and position in the GCC. The Gulf Crisis turned this from a nightmare scenario into reality.⁷¹ Finally, Qatar had long been concerned about the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It saw it as a driver of polarisation, sectarianism and proxy conflicts across the region, in which other countries were forced to take sides or were relegated to "mere spheres of influence or spaces to settle old scores."⁷² Crucially, given its own geographical and political position, it feared any direct conflagration between its two big neighbours; in the words of one Qatari academic, Qatar felt essentially stuck "between a rock and a hard place."⁷³

10. 2. 3. US Retrenchment and International (In)Action

The third set of factors that Qatar perceived as driving instability in the MENA during the 2010s (and before) were the actions — and inactions — of external powers and the international community as a whole. Throughout the decade, Qatari leaders have consistently complained that international powers, specifically the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, were not doing enough to intervene in, and resolve conflicts in the MENA. Qatar supported and participated in the UN-mandated international intervention in Libya in 2011, seeing it as a model for how regional and international powers should work together.⁷⁴ In turn, it blamed the lack of international action for allowing the war in Syria to escalate and other conflicts to fester — Mohammed bin Abdulrahman wrote in 2016 that the violence in Syria had been enabled by "those who have stood aside and done nothing as the slaughter has continued."⁷⁵ Qatar also held the international community responsible for creating the kind of environment that left regional powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to feel unconstrained and free to engage in actions such as the boycott against Qatar in 2017.⁷⁶ In this context, Qatari leaders also persistently

⁷¹ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "In Conversation with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar," interview by Ahmad Dallal (Georgetown University Qatar, Doha, 2 April 2019), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWhXmxzkkHY> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁷² T. b. H. Al-Thani, "Speech," (Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session).

⁷³ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁷⁴ Christopher Phillips (Reader, Queen Mary, University of London), interview with author, 26 March 2019.

⁷⁵ M. b. A. Al-Thani, "How the UN Can Save Aleppo."

⁷⁶ Discussed in interview with: Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author. See also: Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar," (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 19 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

lamented what they perceived as the international community's failure to push for the implementation of UN resolutions and other initiatives to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In their view, this was enabling Israel to continue to oppress the Palestinian people, thereby perpetuating a “main igniter to all the turbulence in the Middle East.”⁷⁷

However, while Qatar deplored the ineffectiveness of the rules-based international system in the MENA, its main focus was on the regional policies of individual international powers, first and foremost the USA. As outlined in the literature review in Chapter 5, Qatar’s close defence relationships with the USA, in particular, and European countries like the UK and France, had been the central pillar of its national security strategy for decades. Nevertheless, Qatari leaders consistently assessed US policies in the region as destabilising, usually citing the 2003 Iraq War (which it saw as having fuelled sectarianism and regional polarisation),⁷⁸ and Washington’s handling of the Arab Uprisings and their aftermath. From their perspective, the Obama administration's refusal to intervene decisively against the Al-Assad regime in Syria and lack of consultation with regional countries during the negotiations for the JCPOA contributed to instability in the region, as did President Trump’s approach to issues such as the Gulf Crisis and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁷⁹ Qatar also criticised the actions of other international powers, particularly Russia’s intervention in Syria since 2015,⁸⁰ but it saw these as secondary to, or even the result of, the position of the USA.

In sum, in Qatar's perception, instability in the Middle East during the 2010s was primarily driven by the decisions and actions of governments, both in the region

⁷⁷ Qatari leaders have invoked the Israel/Palestine issue throughout the decade; examples include: Al-Attiyah, “Is this the End”; Hamad bin Jassim, Al-Thani, “Palestine’s Reality,” interview by David Frost, *Frost Over the World*, 8 November 2011, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liCfeK16vZ4> [accessed 26 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2013), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/68/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (28th Arab League Summit).

⁷⁸ See for example: Al-Attiyah, “Is this the End”; H. b. J. “The MENA Region.”

⁷⁹ This sense of disappointment that the USA had not intervened more decisively in Syria or in the Gulf Crisis came through clearly in interviews with senior Qatari officials: Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author; Senior Qatari Military Officer, interview with author, 29 March 2018.

⁸⁰ Qatar has blamed Russia for blocking UN Security Council resolutions on Syria; see: Al-Attiyah, “Priorities for Regional Security.” It has also criticised Russia’s intervention in Syria, while consistently stressing its desire to have a productive relationship with Moscow; see: Khalid Al-Attiyah, “How Serious Is Qatar About Human Rights?” interview by Tim Sebastian, *DW Conflict Zone*, 21 October 2015, available at: [accessed 26 June 2020]; Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “The Fall of Aleppo Won’t End the Syrian War,” interview by Hashem Ahelbarra, *Talk to Al-Jazeera*, 13 December 2016, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2016/12/qatar-fm-fall-aleppo-won-syrian-war-161213135847479.html> [accessed 26 June 2020].

and beyond. It saw governments' economic mismanagement as having created the conditions for the Arab Uprisings, and their violent repression of popular demands for change as igniting conflicts that spilt across national borders and gave rise to international terrorism. This was exacerbated by the actions of regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which were supporting counter-revolutionary currents across the region and, through their rival pursuits of hegemonic power, fomenting regional polarisation. Finally, all of this was enabled by the regional policies of external powers, especially the USA, and the ineffectiveness of the international system.

10. 3. Self-Perception: Qatar's Role in the Middle East

The Qatari leadership's perception of their country and its role within the MENA during the 2010s was characterised by a combination of pragmatism and exceptionalism, occasionally coloured by "a bit of a megalomaniac"⁸¹ tendency. This was neatly illustrated in comments made by Hamad bin Jassim in 2013: He insisted that Qatar had "no intention of claiming a leadership role" in the MENA, dismissing the very notion as impossible due to its small size. Yet, he also described Qatar's regional role as guided by a commitment to lofty goals such as building a "stable Arab world, developed in all areas [and] peace across the entire region."⁸²

10. 3. 1. Security through Activism and Visionary Leadership

As outlined in the literature review in Chapter 5, Qatari leaders had long been acutely aware of their country's vulnerable position in a volatile region. Despite Qatar's wealth, there was a recognition that in terms of traditional power metrics Qatar would always be inferior to the larger and more powerful countries in its neighbourhood. Ever since Hamad bin Khalifa's ascent to power in 1995, Qatar sought to resolve this security conundrum by building a foreign policy that raised Qatar's profile in the region and on the international stage. To this end, Qatar concluded defence agreements with the USA and other international powers, highlighted its importance for global energy markets,⁸³ and invested

⁸¹ Krieg, interview with author.

⁸² H. b. J. Al-Thani, "Qatar's Prime Minister."

⁸³ Khalid Al-Attiya, "Qatar to Saudi Arabia: Quit Trying to Overthrow Our Government," *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2018, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/qatar-to-saudi-arabia-quit-trying-to-overthrow-our-government/2018/02/02/05a1a848-0759-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html?utm_term=.d95a9f706789. [accessed 26 June 2020].

financially and diplomatically in becoming a regional player.⁸⁴ Qatar's determination "not to live on the sidelines of life"⁸⁵ and to instead seek an international footprint much larger than other countries of comparable size, could therefore be seen as pragmatic. The logic was: "if you are noisy and you are loud, the world will support you; and if the world supports you, you are not going to be Kuwait,"⁸⁶ a reference to Iraq's invasion of its smaller and richer neighbour in 1990. This is not to say that adopting a "hyperactive"⁸⁷ foreign policy was the only way to address Qatar's security concerns. Instead, it could be seen as the result of the pragmatic elements in Qatar's self-perception mixing with a strong sense of exceptionalism. Since the 1990s, Qatar's leaders perceived — and presented — themselves, their country and its role in the region as unique in the MENA (and beyond).⁸⁸ In his inaugural speech in 2013, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani summarised this with the words: "we are people with visions."⁸⁹

This notion of Qatar's visionary leadership was primarily tied to the personality of Hamad bin Khalifa and a small group of trusted advisers, including his most prominent wife, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Misned, his Minister of Energy and Industry Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Attiyah, and his long-time Prime- and Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim. They were responsible for Qatar's dramatic development from a relatively poor and regionally insignificant backwater, into a super-rich energy and media powerhouse with a regional and global footprint. In his inaugural speech, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani credited his father's leadership with having "transferred Qatar from a state struggling to survive and grow to a state of a solid and confident stature."⁹⁰ Tamim bin Hamad himself, meanwhile, has generally been regarded as more cautious than his father, especially with regards to his government's regional activism. Qatar's self-

⁸⁴ See for example: T. b. H. Al-Thani, "The Inaugural Speech"; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar," (speech, Opening of the Advisory Council 44th Session, Doha, 3 November 2015), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁸⁵ T. b. H. Al-Thani, "The Inaugural Speech."

⁸⁶ Stephens, interview with author.

⁸⁷ Ana Echagüe, "Qatar: The Opportunist," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid: FRIDE, 2015), 67.

⁸⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Official, interview with author, 19 March 2019; Krieg, interview with author; Rory Miller (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 12 April 2018; Muzel, interview with author; Gerd Nonneman (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 17 April 2018; Stephens, interview with author; Steven Wright (Associate Professor, Hamad Bin Khalifa University), interview with author, 1 April 2018.

⁸⁹ T. b. H. Al-Thani, "The Inaugural Speech."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

perception, however, remained mostly unchanged.⁹¹ In the Qatari narrative, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani has also been presented as an exceptional leader. This had arguably less to do with his own personality and leadership style than with the circumstances of his succession in 2013, and the surge of Qatari nationalism since the outbreak of the 2017 Gulf Crisis. Hamad bin Khalifa's voluntary abdication constituted yet another example of Qatar breaking with traditional political norms in the region, while making the then 33-year old Tamim bin Hamad the youngest head of state in the Arab world at that time — both these facts were frequently highlighted by Qatari leaders and government representatives.⁹² After June 2017, Tamim bin Hamad was then elevated as a symbol of Qatar's steadfastness under the malign pressure of its neighbours. His portrait appeared everywhere in the country, and government representatives described him as "the beacon of enlightenment in the region."⁹³

The idea of Qatar as a regional pioneer, led by an enlightened leadership, became ever-deeper ingrained in Qatar's self-perception since Hamad bin Khalifa's ascent to power. It was reinforced by a number of high-profile achievements. The most important success story in this context was the government's decision in the 1990s to bet heavily on the development of the LNG sector. This eventually transformed Qatar from an insignificant oil producer into a world-leading gas supplier and provided the financial and geopolitical foundation for Qatar's domestic development and foreign policy activism.⁹⁴ Other achievements included the successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup as the first Arab and Muslim country in history,⁹⁵ and the creation of Al-Jazeera, which revolutionised the regional and global media landscape⁹⁶ —

⁹¹ Discussed in interviews with: Former British Diplomat, phone interview with author, 29 March 2019; Kamrava, interview with author; Nonneman, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author; Karen Young (Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute), phone interview with author, 7 May 2019.

⁹² Al-Kuwari, "'Understood' and 'Misunderstood'"; H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2014; Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, "Qatar Emir's Speech on Power Transfer in Full," *Gulf News*, 25 June 2013, available at: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-emir-s-speech-on-power-transfer-in-full-1.1201545>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹³ Khalid Al-Attiah, "Exclusive: Qatar's Defence Minister," interview by Soraya Lennie, *TRT World*, 17 July 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlddmVV6etk> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹⁴ Roberts, *Qatar*, 47-58.

⁹⁵ Qatari leaders have often argued that Qatar would host the tournament on behalf of the Arab world; see for example: Lolwah Al-Khater, "The Gulf Crisis & the GCC Regional Balance," interview by Tim Constantine (Gulf International Forum, Washington DC, 29 March 2019), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmlHPD6wwvc> [accessed 26 June 2020]; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "Special Dialogue," interview by Declan Walsh and Matthew Karnitschnig (Mediterranean Dialogue, Rome, 22 November 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCfAXXtK6dA> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹⁶ Qatari officials have consistently defended Al-Jazeera throughout the decade; see for example: Al-Khater, "Qatar's Crisis"; M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Fireside Chat"; M. b. A. Al-Thani, "The Crisis in the Gulf."

Hamad bin Khalifa explained the ambitious intent behind the network's creation in 2010: "I created Jazeera, and I believed that people in the Middle East have to understand what's going on and to discuss their views freely."⁹⁷ At the regional level, Qatari leaders also found apparent confirmation that Qatar was on the 'right' path, particularly in the years immediately following the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings. This was neatly encapsulated in the optics of, and reporting around, the Arab League Summit in Doha in March 2013. Both Egypt and Syria, the traditional heavyweights of Arab politics, were for the first — and ultimately only — time represented by Qatar's close allies Mohammed Morsi and Moaz Al-Khatib,⁹⁸ respectively. Qatar appeared not as the regional leader, necessarily, but as the crucial partner of some of the region's most important states.⁹⁹ This status was short-lived. Al-Khatib resigned in April, Morsi was overthrown in July, and Qatar's regional footprint and activism decreased significantly over the coming years. As the literature review in Chapter 5 details, this was partially conditioned by Tamim bin Hamad's more domestically-focused agenda, but also came as the result of significant pressure from Qatar's GCC neighbours, manifested both in the 2013/14 and especially the 2017 Gulf Crises. Yet, these crises, and the fact that Qatar was able to survive them both politically and economically, ultimately served to bolster Qatar's sense of exceptionalism and righteousness.¹⁰⁰ Mohammed bin Abdulrahman declared in 2017 that Qatar was "the most progressive country"¹⁰¹ in the MENA.

10. 3. 2. Regional Pioneer and Role Model

This self-perception of Qatar as charting a unique course in the MENA, but with the ambition to affect developments far beyond its borders, substantially influenced how it viewed its role in the region. This could be understood as

⁹⁷ Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, "Interview Transcript: Qatar's Sheikh Hamad," interview by Martin Dickson and Roula Khalaf, *Financial Times*, 24 October 2010, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/9163abca-df97-11df-bed9-00144feabdc0> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹⁸ He took Syria's seat at the summit as the head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

⁹⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Stephens, interview with author; Wright, interview with author. See also: Ian Black, "Qatar Orchestrates Unity at the Doha 'Summit of the Syrian Seat'," *The Guardian*, 27 March 2013, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2013/mar/27/syria-khatib-qatar-palestine>. [accessed 12 March 2019]; Michael Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux," in *Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism*, ed. Thanassis Cambanis (New York: The Century Foundation, 2017).

¹⁰⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Official, interview with author; Miller, interview with author; Muzel, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author. See also: Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "Resolving the Gulf Crisis: Challenges and Prospects," (speech, Arab Centre Washington DC, Washington DC, 29 June 2017), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHJKLMO4Q1o> [accessed 26 June 2020]; M. b. H. Al-Thani, "The Blockade."

¹⁰¹ M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Resolving the Gulf Crisis."

consisting of three main, interrelated components, all of which reflected the combination of pragmatism and exceptionalism characteristic of Qatar's self-perception: First, while Qatar did not claim regional leadership, it considered itself to have a potential role model function for other Arab states. It saw its readiness to embrace popularly-driven change in the region, and its leadership's willingness to engage with, and respond to, its population's demands, as an exemplary attitude others could follow — even in countries that did not enjoy Qatar's unique combination of enormous material wealth, and a small and relatively homogenous population. According to Al-Attiyah and Mohammed bin Abdulrahman, respectively, "Qatar is an interesting metaphor for the Middle East and its future: full of youth and ambition, hungry for development and progress,"¹⁰² with a leadership whose power and popularity "was not built on oppression, fear and censorship."¹⁰³ Unsurprisingly, this ignored questions about Qatar's own human rights record, including intolerance of overt criticism of the Emir and restrictions to freedom of expression documented by international human rights organisations.¹⁰⁴ Where Qatar deemed that political leaders were on the right path, it was willing to support governments financially. As Hamad bin Jassim put it, investments in the economic development of Arab countries was "part of Qatar's plan [...] they create jobs and above all, we believe that this represents a step towards regional integration and a the spread of wealth in many Arab countries."¹⁰⁵

Second, Qatar understood — and actively sought to position — itself as a capable and flexible facilitator of dialogue in the MENA,¹⁰⁶ both between countries and non-state actors in the region, and as "a bridge between the Arab world and the international community."¹⁰⁷ This was tied to the Qatari leadership's above described conviction that their country's security was best served by maintaining as diverse a set of constructive external relationships as

¹⁰² Al-Attiyah, "Qatari Foreign Policy Today."

¹⁰³ M. b. A. Al-Thani, "The Crisis in the Gulf."

¹⁰⁴ See for example: Amnesty International, "Qatar: Repressive New Law Further Curbs Freedom of Expression," 20 January 2020, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/qatar-repressive-new-law-further-curbs-freedom-of-expression/>. [accessed 12 January 2021]; Human Rights Watch, "Country Page: Qatar," available at: <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/qatar>. [accessed 12 January 2021]. During the decade, media coverage has focused in particular on the case of Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb, a poet jailed for allegedly criticising Qatar's government during the Arab Uprisings; see: BBC, "Qatar Poet Mohammed Al-Ajami Released after Pardon," 17 March 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35830372>. [accessed 12 January 2021].

¹⁰⁵ H. b. J. Al-Thani, "Qatar's Prime Minister." See also: T. b. H. Al-Thani, "Address by His Highness," (68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

¹⁰⁶ Al-Attiyah, "Qatari Foreign Policy Today"; M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Resolving the Gulf Crisis."

¹⁰⁷ Ulrichsen, interview with author.

possible. Examples of this “open door foreign policy,”¹⁰⁸ were Qatar’s efforts to help facilitate negotiations between the USA and the Afghan Taliban,¹⁰⁹ and its engagement with Hamas in Gaza, which was closely coordinated with the Israeli and US governments.¹¹⁰ Third, and closely related to the above, Qatar saw and presented itself as a physical safe space not just for adversaries in a conflict to meet, but also for individuals from across the region fearing persecution in their home countries. Qatari leaders described this willingness to host exiles and dissidents of various political persuasions (including, but not limited to Islamists) as part of Qatar’s identity. In his inaugural address, Tamim bin Hamad affirmed that Qatar had long been a “refuge for the oppressed,”¹¹¹ invoking the memory of the state’s modern founder Jassim bin Mohammed Al-Thani (ruled 1878-1913), who had described Qatar in a poem as a “Kaaba of the dispossessed” where exiles could congregate.¹¹² Just like his father, Tamim bin Hamad said he would “remain faithful to this pledge of supporting the aggrieved.”¹¹³ Officially, Doha claimed that dissidents “cannot practice politics against any other Arab country”¹¹⁴ while in Qatar; in practice, many of them were employed by the Qatari government, worked for or appeared on Al-Jazeera, or became key influencers of Qatar’s foreign policy, particularly in the wake of the Arab Uprisings. The list of prominent examples included the Egyptian and Libyan clerics Youssef Al-Qaradawi and Ali Al-Salabi, as well as Rafik Abdessalam, son in law of Ennahda leader Rashed Ghanouchi and Tunisia’s Foreign Minister from 2011-2013.¹¹⁵

Throughout the 2010s, Qatar insisted that it did not pose a threat to anyone in the region, and denied charges that it was supporting extremist Islamist groups and interfering in the internal affairs of Arab states.¹¹⁶ This could be regarded as

¹⁰⁸ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “CNN Interview.”

¹⁰⁹ Sultan Barakat, “The Qatari Spring: Qatar’s Emerging Role in Peacemaking,” (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012); Sabena Siddiqui, “How Pakistan and Qatar Played a Key Role in Brokering the Afghan Peace Deal,” *The New Arab*, 3 March 2020, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/3/3/pakistan-and-qatars-key-role-in-afghan-peace-deal>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹¹⁰ See for example: David B. Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar’s ‘Islamist’ Soft Power,” (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 2019); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications,” (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

¹¹¹ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech.”

¹¹² Roberts, *Qatar*, 33.

¹¹³ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech.”

¹¹⁴ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “CNN Interview.”

¹¹⁵ See for example: Roberts, *Qatar*.

¹¹⁶ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Rethinking the Role of Small State Actors in International Politics,” interview by Paula J. Dobriansky (Concordia Summit, New York, 23 September 2019), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqElkphUz_8 [accessed 26 June 2020].

self-serving, willfully naive or even duplicitous — which is what governments in Saudi Arabia and the UAE asserted (as detailed elsewhere in this thesis). At least at the beginning of the decade, however, Qatar appeared genuinely unaware of the extent to which its activities in the region were being perceived by its neighbours as directly threatening their national security interests. Many of the observers and experts interviewed for this thesis agreed with this assessment;¹¹⁷ one likened Qatar’s behaviour in the first two years following the Arab Uprisings to that of “a firefighter in a fireproof suit going around lighting fires in everyone else’s back garden.”¹¹⁸ After 2014, however, and especially since 2017, however, Qatar was fully conscious of how its regional policy was seen in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and elsewhere in the region.

In sum, Qatar perceived itself as occupying a unique position in the MENA during the 2010s. With virtually no domestic political opposition, and encouraged by a series of economic and diplomatic successes, including in the immediate wake of the Arab Uprisings, this was driven by a sense that its leadership had performed better than those of many other Arab countries, and could therefore claim a to be setting an example. Qatar’s understanding of its role in the region was characterised by this sense of exceptionalism, combined with its leaders’ pragmatic, but also highly ambitious, notion that an active foreign policy was crucial to their country’s survival. The 2017 Gulf Crisis, which could be understood as the result of how Qatar’s neighbours reacted to this approach, ultimately served to reinforce this self-perception.

10. 4. Conclusion

One Qatari academic interviewed for this thesis summarised Qatar’s perception of the strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s with a metaphor. He argued that in 2011 Qatar had quickly concluded that the Arab Uprisings were fundamentally changing the region. In its understanding, this change was like “a train — so you are either driving or you are on the tracks.” Spurred by self-confidence and ambition, Qatar got on the train and sought to influence its direction wherever it could. Yet, “the thing the Qataris did not expect was that

¹¹⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Former British Diplomat, interview with author; Kamrava, interview with author; Neil Quilliam (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 26 February 2019.

¹¹⁸ Stephens, interview with author.

there would be somebody on the tracks that could actually just remove the tracks to derail the train.”¹¹⁹

Qatar’s perception of the environment it encountered in the region evolved over the course of the decade. Statements made by Qatari leaders and officials were often coloured by specific development current at that time — from the enthusiasm about Qatar’s successful participation in the Libya intervention in 2011, to the disappointment about the lack of international intervention in Syria in the middle of the decade, to the defiant insistence that Qatar had only wanted the best for the region since the beginning of the 2017 Gulf Crisis. Nevertheless, looking at the decade as a whole, the chapter identifies a number of central themes that together give an impression of how Qatar made sense of events in the region, and thereby serve as a basis for the analysis in the following chapter.

Qatar’s own big-picture narrative described the region as divided into two main camps: The Arab people, who rose up to demand a better future for themselves and their countries, and were backed by Qatar and Turkey, whose wise leaders saw their eventual success as both necessary and inevitable. On the other side stood the forces of the counter-revolution, consisting of a broad array of tyrannical and oppressive regimes including those who violently refused to give up power (e.g. in Syria), those seeking to reassert themselves (e.g. in Egypt, Libya and Yemen), and those who were trying to preserve and accumulate regional power (e.g. the leaders of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Over the course of the decade, the counter-revolutionaries had gradually gained the upper hand — though, Qatar insisted, only temporarily — enabled by inaction and negligence of the international community.

From Qatar’s perspective, instability in the MENA was therefore primarily the result of the decisions and actions of governments, both in the region and beyond. It saw the Arab Uprisings as the response to decades of failed political and economic management by various governments — in turn affirming its own leadership’s record, as evidenced by the lack of a domestic protest movement in Qatar itself. It further viewed the violent repression of popular demands for change and the competition between regional powers for influence as fomenting and fuelling conflicts that destabilised the region further and further, giving rise

¹¹⁹ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

to sectarianism and terrorism in the process. It also perceived instability in the MENA as brought about by the ineffectiveness of the international system, which, in turn, it regarded primarily as the consequence of a lack of understanding of, and/or commitment to, regional security dynamics by successive US administrations.

In this environment, Qatar perceived itself as an exceptional, but pragmatic pioneer in the MENA. It saw its role in the region as that of a role model in terms of how governments should productively engage with their people; a dedicated supporter of economic development in the region, willing to invest its wealth to support fellow Arab countries; and a passionate advocate for political dialogue, eager to act as an intermediary even to groups and individuals others considered beyond the pale. The 2017 Gulf Crisis represented the realisation of one of Qatar's greatest fears, and the apex of regional instability. That said, building on the fact that it was able to survive the initial shock of the crisis, and would eventually sign a settlement agreement with its neighbours in January 2021 without making major concessions,¹²⁰ it also served to reinforce Qatar's views of itself as standing on the right side of history, and its conviction that stability in the MENA required change. This is the subject of the next chapter.

¹²⁰ Michael Stephens, "Sunshine over the Gulf," *Royal United Services Institute*, 7 January 2021, available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/sunshine-over-gulf>. [accessed 10 March 2021].

11. Qatar's Conception of Stability

Security through Inclusiveness

Qatar was committed to building “a stable Arab world” said then-Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim in 2013, “our goal is peace across the entire region.”¹ He also declared that “stability in the region is to go with the people; this is why we support the people in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya,”² and that Qatar was working to help create “an environment where we can live in peace, all of us, with Israel, with Iran, with Iraq, with Yemen, with everybody in the region.”³ Throughout the 2010s, Qatari leaders insisted that stability in the MENA required that the popular demands for political and economic change of the Arab Uprisings were heeded. According to Tamim bin Hamad, “there is no lasting stability without development and social justice.”⁴ Regionally, Qatar saw stability dependent on bringing an end to the “game of power”⁵ driven by what it saw as the counter-revolutionary and hegemonic ambitions of several of its neighbours — namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran. In 2015, Tamim bin Hamad implored the international community to “act quickly to rein in the forces of instability and violence;”⁶ two years later, after Qatar had been subjected to the political and economic boycott led by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, he urged governments in the region “to resolve our differences through dialogue.”⁷

¹ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Qatar’s Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani,” interview by Ibrahim Mohamed, *Journal Interview*, 21 April 2013, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFd7tAhebEQ> [accessed 25 June 2020].

² Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Mali, Syria and Beyond: Dealing with the Current Crisis,” (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 3 February 2013), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2013/video/panel-discussion-mali-syria-and-beyond-dealing-with-the-current-crises/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

³ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani,” interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 2 February 2012, available at: <https://charlierose.com/videos/15173> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁴ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 28 September 2015), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/70/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁵ M. b. A. Al-Thani, “A View from Qatar,” (speech, Mediterranean Dialogues, Rome, 2 December 2017), available at: <https://rome-med.org/speeches/a-view-from-qatar/> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁶ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Qatar’s Message to Obama.” *The New York Times*, 24 February 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/opinion/qatars-message-to-obama.html>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁷ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session, Doha, 14 November 2017), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

This chapter analyses Qatar's conception of stability in the MENA. The previous chapter shows that from Qatar's perspective, regional instability during the 2010s was driven by the decisions and actions of governments. Consequently, Qatar's conception of regional stability was centred around its views of how political leaders in the region and beyond should behave and interact with each other. The chapter argues that Qatar saw stability as resulting from governments that constructively engaged with their populations, and prevented the radicalisation of political demands through a degree of inclusion in political processes and by facilitating economic opportunity. Regionally, Qatar sought a system of order that protected the independence of small states by curbing the influence of individual regional powers and arresting the region's polarisation into competing blocs. Finally, Qatar saw the consistent engagement of external powers — most importantly the USA — as essential for regional stability. Yet, it wanted them to coordinate their regional policies with partners in the MENA, ideally Qatar itself, and primarily focus on guaranteeing the regional order, rather than imposing their own interests.

11. 1. The Role of External Powers

Qatar saw the involvement of external powers — particularly of the USA — in the MENA as critical to regional stability. This was tied to Qatar's approach to its own national security, but also to how it perceives its role in the region. As discussed in previous chapters, Qatar's defence and foreign policies were built around its close relationship with the USA and a proactive diplomatic and economic strategy designed to make Qatar an important partner for countries around the world. Qatari leaders sought to position their country as a facilitator of dialogue between global powers and the Arab and Islamic world. Yet, while Qatar saw international engagement in the region necessary for stability, it also considered various past interventions by external powers — most prominently the US invasion of Iraq in 2003⁸ and Russia's intervention in Syria since 2015⁹

⁸ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, "Is This the End of the Middle East (as We Know It)?" (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 8 February 2015), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2015/video/panel-discussion-is-this-the-end-of-the-middle-east-as-we-know-it-1/filter/video/> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Al-Thani, Hamad bin Jassim, "The MENA Region after the Iran Nuclear Deal," (speech, Chatham House, London, 19 November 2015), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/mena-region-after-iran-nuclear-deal> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁹ Qatari leaders repeatedly denounced Russia's intervention in Syria on the side of the Assad regime as contributing to instability in the country and the wider region; see for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, "Discussion with Qatar's Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Dr Khalid Bin Mohammad Al-Attiyah," (speech, New York University Model United Nations, New York, 1 October 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yy4IY6xa-5s> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVXhk-aL9A0> [accessed 25 June 2020].

— as destabilising. Similarly, it consistently criticised Washington, Moscow and others for treating the MENA as an area of geopolitical competition, paralysing international conflict resolution mechanisms such as the UN Security Council, and fuelling regional conflicts.¹⁰ Consequently, from Qatar’s perspective, stability in the region depended on steering external engagement in what it considered the right direction: towards upholding the rules-based international system in the region, including, critically, preserving the independence of small states like Qatar itself.

11. 1. 1. The Rules-Based International System

Qatar considered the rules-based international system, as enshrined in the UN Charter, a useful framework for how a stable regional order could be externally guaranteed. On paper, at least, it saw the system as providing the protections a small state like Qatar needed, emphasising state sovereignty and proscribing inter-state aggression. Simultaneously, it contained mechanisms and norms to authorise interventions to resolve international conflicts and excessive intra-state violence.¹¹ Qatari leaders sometimes joined in complaints that international institutions were dominated by too few states.¹² Ultimately, however, they saw themselves well-positioned to work the system to their advantage, leveraging Qatar’s global importance as an energy supplier, and drawing confidence from the close ties they had built with countries around the world, especially the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.¹³ Qatar also liked the UN Charter’s provisions integrating regional organisations

¹⁰ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Priorities for Regional Security,” (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 8 December 2012), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2012-f58e/second-plenary-session-f3e9/dr-khalid-bin-mohammad-al-attiyah-e5f5> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “How the UN Can Save Aleppo,” *The New York Times*, 12 October 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/13/opinion/how-the-un-can-save-aleppo.html>. [accessed 25 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech by His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 35th GCC Summit, Doha, 9 December 2014), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹¹ Discussed in interviews with: Qatari Academic (B), interview with author, 15 April 2018; Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 23 March 2018; Steven Wright (Associate Professor, Hamad Bin Khalifa University), interview with author, 1 April 2018.

¹² Calls for reform of various UN institutions to make them more responsive to interests of non-western actors can be found in: Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2014), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/69/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, Opening of the Advisory Council 42nd Session, Doha, 5 November 2013), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹³ Discussed in interviews with: Emile Hokayem (Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies), interview with author, 27 March 2019; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author, 27 February 2019.

into international conflict management processes. While it wanted external powers to uphold the international system in the MENA, it wanted the impetus for interventions to come from within the region.¹⁴ As then-Foreign Minister Khalid Al-Attiyah explained in 2013: “If causes of the problems are found in the region, solutions must be found in the region.”¹⁵

For Qatar, the 2011 UN-mandated, NATO-led intervention in Libya represented an ideal case of how external powers could work through the international system to contribute to stability in the MENA. The UN Security Council authorised the intervention only after first the GCC and then the Arab League had officially requested it, with Qatar a key broker in both instances. During the intervention itself, Qatar was able to play its desired role, contributing to the military campaign and, importantly, functioning as an interlocutor between Libyan opposition groups and the international coalition.¹⁶ Developments in Libya after 2011, meanwhile, and especially the escalation of the war in Syria, but also the lack of international intervention in other regional regional conflicts such as the 2017 Gulf Crisis, were, in Qatar’s view, examples of the international community not fulfilling its responsibilities to stability in the MENA. In 2017, Tamim bin Hamad complained to the UN General Assembly that “a feeling is spreading [in the region] that the peoples who are exposed to repression face their fate alone, as if the international arena is governed by the law of the jungle.”¹⁷ Yet, while Qatar criticised Russia for blocking various UN Security Council resolutions related to Syria, it considered US engagement in the region as the single most important variable with regard to external powers’ contributions to regional stability. As the world’s superpower, Washington had, in

¹⁴ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Syria and the Regional Impact,” (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 7 December 2013), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2013-4e92/plenary-3-d35d/attiyah-7cd7> [accessed 26 June 2020]. Also discussed in interview with: Stephens, interview with author;

¹⁵ Al-Attiyah, “Syria and the Regional Impact.”

¹⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Christopher Phillips (Reader, Queen Mary, University of London), interview with author, 26 March 2019; Stephens, interview with author. For detailed accounts of Qatar’s involvement in the 2011 intervention in Libya see: Florence Gaub, “From Doha with Love: Gulf Foreign Policy in Libya,” *LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers* 1 (2015), 52-58; David B. Roberts, “Behind Qatar’s Intervention in Libya,” *Foreign Affairs*, 28 September 2011, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2011-09-28/behind-qatars-intervention-libya>. [accessed 12 March 2019]; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Small States with Big Roles: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring,” *HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series* 3 (2012).

¹⁷ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 19 September 2017), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

Qatar's view, a "global obligation"¹⁸ to support stability in the MENA. One observer argued that for Qatari leaders referring to the "international community is a polite way of talking about American hegemony."¹⁹

11. 1. 2. The USA

Most importantly, Qatar wanted the USA to unconditionally guarantee its national security. It saw the continued US military's presence in Qatar as an indispensable physical deterrent that could not be replaced by Qatar's other bilateral defence relationships, much less by its military.²⁰ As for the wider region, Qatar ideally wanted to see an active and engaged US policy that took its cues from, and was coordinated with, its partners in the region. In essence, it wanted to see the right level of interventionism from Washington, with Qatar itself judging what 'right' was at any given moment. Hamad bin Jassim summarised this view in 2015: Referencing the Bush and Obama presidencies, he assessed that the region had suffered "for the last 15 years from two administrations, one I call it high voltage, and one low voltage. I hope now we have somebody in the middle who can make the balance."²¹ This did not materialise with the Trump administration; and the President's apparent initial endorsement of the boycott imposed on Qatar by its neighbours in 2017 prompted Hamad bin Jassim to complain that "as the superpower country in the world [the USA] should be more thoughtful when they take measures like this or support others who take measures."²² Qatar found a way to restore its relationship with the Trump White House, at least to the point where it no longer feared complete abandonment. Its hope for a more "thoughtful" approach from Washington towards the region, however, remained. It wanted the USA to deploy its military to fight jihadist groups like Daesh, but also to hasten the end of violent conflicts such as the war in Syria, which, from Qatar's perspective,

¹⁸ Khalid Al-Attiyah, "What Season Is Next for the Middle East?" (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 2 February 2014), available at: <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2014/video/panel-discussion-what-season-is-next-for-the-middle-east/filter/video/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹⁹ Mehran Kamrava (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 11 April 2018. Also discussed in interviews with: Jane Kinninmont (Head of Programmes, The Elders), interview with author, 4 April 2019; Gerd Nonneman (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 17 April 2018; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

²⁰ Discussed in interviews with: Giorgio Cafiero (CEO of Gulf State Analytics), phone interview with author, 4 December 2019; Rory Miller (Professor, Georgetown University, Qatar), interview with author, 12 April 2018; Qatari Academic (A), interview with author, 3 April 2018; Senior Qatari Military Officer, interview with author, 29 March 2018.

²¹ H. b. J. Al-Thani, "The MENA Region."

²² Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, "Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani," interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 12 June 2017, available at: <https://charlieroose.com/videos/30589> [accessed 25 June 2020].

had provided the conditions for their emergence in the first place.²³ In the Gulf, it wanted the US military to deter armed conflict, while — crucially — refraining from any action against Iran that could precipitate violent escalation. In fact, although Qatar’s leaders felt insufficiently consulted in the JCPOA negotiations,²⁴ they were in favour of a US approach to Iran focused on diplomacy. This was particularly the case since bilateral relations between Doha and Tehran grew closer following the 2017 Gulf Crisis.²⁵ Ultimately, Qatar wanted the USA to buy into its proposition that political processes in the region had to be based on dialogue, including with Islamist groups others deemed beyond the pale — with Qatar acting as a prime facilitator of such exchanges, just like it did with the talks between Washington and the Afghan Taliban.²⁶

Although Qatar regarded the USA as the most important external power in the MENA, it also considered it important to secure the support of other international actors, both with regard to regional stability, and for its national security. Qatar had long seen building relations with European countries, but also with Russia, China and other powers outside the region as important to hedge against changes and inconsistencies in US policy, partially to ensure Washington’s continued attention.²⁷ This view was reinforced by the 2017 Gulf Crisis, when Qatar had to acknowledge that the neighbours who were now threatening its security and prosperity also considered the USA as their most important international partner. Al-Attiyah explained in 2019: “If you have an ally,

²³ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Qatari Foreign Policy Today: Challenges and Opportunities,” (speech, Princeton University, Princeton, 29 September 2014), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f-kWq2sbhU> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Lolwah Al-Khater, “Priorities and Challenges for the Gulf: Peace, Security, and Mitigating Conflict,” interview by Anne Patterson, *Women’s Foreign Policy Group*, 26 March 2019, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MS_Yhgybmw [accessed 25 June 2020]; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness,” (70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

²⁴ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani,” interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, 13 May 2014, available at: <https://charlirose.com/videos/17340> [accessed 25 June 2020].

²⁵ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, “Fireside Chat,” interview by Steven Clemons (Global Security Forum, Doha, 16 October 2019), available at: <https://youtu.be/aAC-5E3if0Q> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Al-Jazeera, “Qatar Moves to Ease Iran-U.S. Tensions in the Gulf,” 15 May 2019, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/15/qatar-moves-to-ease-iran-us-tensions-in-the-gulf/>. [accessed 26 June 2020]. Also discussed in interviews with: William Law (Journalist, *The Gulf Matters*), interview with author, 26 February 2019; Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

²⁶ Sabena Siddiqui, “How Pakistan and Qatar Played a Key Role in Brokering the Afghan Peace Deal,” *The New Arab*, 3 March 2020, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/3/3/pakistan-and-qatars-key-role-in-afghan-peace-deal>. [accessed 25 June 2020]. See also: Meshal bin Hamad Al-Thani, “The Blockade on Qatar Is a Smokescreen. Here’s What’s Behind It,” *The Washington Post*, 22 June 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/22/the-blockade-on-qatar-is-a-smokescreen-heres-whats-behind-it/?utm_term=.43b2bac7dbaf. [accessed 18 February 2019]. Also discussed in interview with: Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author, 16 April 2018.

²⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Cafiero, interview with author; US-based Gulf Analyst (A), phone interview with author, 27 March 2019. See also: Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, iBooks, 2015); Jean-Loup Samaan, *Strategic Hedging in the Arabian Peninsula*, Whitehall Paper 92, (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2018).

and your neighbours are friends with your ally too, you have to be flexible when a crisis comes, because, you know, you need to have options.”²⁸ At the time, the statement likely referred primarily to Qatar’s expanding ties with Turkey, but its message also applied to how Qatar saw the involvement of other external powers in the MENA.

11. 1. 3. Europe

From Qatar’s perspective, European countries could make important contributions to its national security and to regional stability, more generally. It considered the UK and France as valuable bilateral defence partners, and powers with global influence as permanent UN Security Council members. To an extent, Qatar saw them as extensions of, or as having a moderating or encouraging influence on, US policy towards the region.²⁹ Furthermore, together with other major European countries like Germany, as well as the European Union as a whole, it viewed the UK and France as important economic partners, both bilaterally and for the Arab world’s future economic development. In terms of their engagement with political developments in individual countries, just like the USA, it effectively wanted European countries to align their approaches with regional partners — primarily Qatar itself.³⁰

11. 1. 4. Russia and China

Qatar’s views regarding China’s role in the MENA were not dissimilar from how it saw those of European countries. It recognised China’s enormous economic potential, especially as a major buyer of Qatari gas and a source of investments into the region’s economic infrastructure under the umbrella of Beijing’s Belt-and-Road Initiative. In terms of the political and security-related facets of regional stability, however, Qatar did not consider China willing to make major contributions, at least not yet.³¹ Russia, meanwhile, came to play an increasingly consequential role for regional stability during the 2010s, in Qatar’s view, particularly with its intervention in Syria. As highlighted in the previous chapter, Qatari leaders frequently criticised Russia’s support for the government

²⁸ Al-Attayah, “Fireside Chat.”

²⁹ See for example: H. b. J. Al-Thani, “The MENA Region.”

³⁰ Several interviewees argued that Qatar sees China and Europe primarily as economic partners in the Middle East: Jonathan Fulton (Assistant Professor, Zayed University, UAE), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019; Hokayem, interview with author; Kinninmont, interviews with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

³¹ Fulton, interview with author.

in Damascus. But they also took great care to emphasise Qatar's "excellent relationship"³² with Moscow, to acknowledge Russia's historic presence in the region, and to express their confidence that Russia could be a productive contributor to regional security.³³ Ultimately, this position could be understood as a reflection of Qatar's recognition that Russian involvement in the MENA was part of a reality that it could not change. Irrespective of its disagreements with Russia, Qatar therefore opted for a conciliatory tone towards Moscow, hoping to incentivise it to refrain from politics that ran counter to its interests, at least outside Syria. According to several observers (Qatari and external), Qatari leaders also respected Russian President Putin for his seemingly clear and reliable positions on regional affairs, as opposed to the more ambiguous and at times erratic US policy in the region.³⁴

In sum, Qatar wanted external powers, and especially the USA, to act as reliable guarantors of Qatar's immediate national security interests, and to uphold a regional order based on the norms of the international rules-based system. Essentially, it wanted external powers to prevent any single regional power from coming to dominate the region, and to stop conflicts in and amongst countries in the region. Throughout, Qatar was comfortable with a degree of competition amongst external powers, as long as this ensured their continued interest in the region. Yet, it wanted any such competition to cease at the point where it began to fuel regional conflicts or paralysed international conflict resolution mechanisms. Rather idealistically, it wanted "super powers to coordinate their efforts for a stable and secured Middle East. This should include encouraging dialogue, solving conflicts through diplomatic means and engaging all parties involved in any dispute."³⁵

11. 2. The Organisation of Regional Order

In Qatar's conception, stability in the MENA required a regional order that was inclusive and rooted in the principles of the international rules-based order, but at least in the first instance prioritised regional solutions to regional problems.

³² Al-Attiyah, "Fireside Chat."

³³ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, "How Serious Is Qatar About Human Rights?" interview by Tim Sebastian, *DW Conflict Zone*, 21 October 2015, available at: [accessed 26 June 2020]; H. b. J. Al-Thani, "The MENA Region."

³⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Kinninmont, interviews with author; Phillips, interview with author; Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

³⁵ Senior Qatari Diplomat (C), email interview with author, 3 June 2018.

As a small, militarily weak state, Qatar needed the regional order to uphold member states' sovereignty and independence. As an ambitious country confident in its ability to contribute to the region's political and economic development, Qatar wanted the regional order to play to what it perceived to be its strengths as a broker of dialogue and an investor.

There was a brief period in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, when the emergence of a regional order resembling Qatar's ideal case scenario appeared possible: The GCC offered economic and political support to its embattled members in Bahrain and Oman and fellow monarchs in Jordan and Morocco, and brokered a transition in Yemen. Together, the GCC and Arab League successfully called for the international intervention in Libya, in which NATO members shouldered most of the military burden, while Arab countries — including Qatar — played an important political role. Meanwhile, Qatar's Al-Jazeera hosted debates about the future of the region; Emir Hamad bin Khalifa's 2012 visit to Gaza promoted Qatar's standing as a champion of the Palestinian cause; and in March 2013, Doha hosted an Arab League Summit including new heads of state from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria (represented by the opposition), all of whom had good relations with Qatar. By contrast, after mid-2017, Qatar found itself confronted with what it perceived as the near-worst case scenario for regional order: Its neighbours sought to politically and economically isolate Qatar, disregarding — at least from Qatar's perspective — all existing regional and international dispute mechanisms. Further, Qatar accused Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, of promoting a zero-sum, exclusionary approach to regional affairs with Iran and Turkey that it saw as undermining regional stability.³⁶

Qatar's understanding of a regional order that would be conducive to stability was shaped by these experiences. The final three years of the 2010s demonstrated the basic conditions Qatar could not live without, while the start of the decade appeared to confirmed that its more aspirational ideas for the organisation of regional affairs were attainable. Fundamentally, Qatar needed the regional order to protect the sovereignty and independence of small states. It needed to prevent the region's larger powers from dominating their smaller neighbours — as happened to Kuwait in 1990, or Qatar in 2017. To ensure this

³⁶ See Chapter 10 for a more detailed description of how Qatar perceived this period; and Chapter 5 for literature references for detailed accounts of Qatar's foreign policy behaviour

condition was met, but also to serve as a foundation “for progress on any other front,”³⁷ Qatar sought a regional security framework comprising of four closely linked components:

11. 2. 1. An Inclusive Order

Firstly, Qatar believed that the regional order had to be inclusive and open to both the region’s Arab and non-Arab states. Qatar saw the MENA as a primarily Arab region; declarations of commitment to Arab unity, “Arab national security,”³⁸ and traditional Arab causes such as Palestinian statehood were a mainstay of Qatar’s public rhetoric before and throughout the 2010s.³⁹ Until 2017, this also included ritual endorsements of GCC communiqués criticising Iranian interference in Arab affairs. Qatar welcomed the JCPOA, but also warned that “this agreement will give a longer hand to Iran to interfere in the region.”⁴⁰ However, Qatar also consistently insisted that Iran, as well as Israel and Turkey, had to be accommodated in the regional order. To an extent, this reflected a pragmatic recognition of geographic and political realities. But it could also be understood as an expression of Qatar’s conviction that attempts to exclude anyone who claims to have a stake in regional affairs would fuel destabilising conflicts. From its perspective, this applied to external powers such as Russia (as explained above), all but the most extreme non-state actors in the region (discussed below), and certainly to the region’s non-Arab states.

Even where Iran, Israel and Turkey’s positions did not align with Qatar’s, Doha saw direct engagement as the most effective way to overcome or manage differences. A senior Qatari academic explained: “Qatar does believe that players like Iran cannot be simply just brushed off, you cannot kill off all enemies [...] everybody has to sit down, talk.”⁴¹ Moreover, Qatar considered

³⁷ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Dialogue (Qatar),” interview by Bronwyn Nielsen and Nicolas Pehlham (Mediterranean Dialogue, Rome, 6 December 2019), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6SP_YfK164 [accessed 26 June 2020].

³⁸ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Amir of Qatar on Becoming the Amir,” *Government Communications Office*, 26 June 2013, available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/>. [accessed 14 February 2019].

³⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Qatari Academic (C), interview with author, 8 April 2018; Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author, 9 April 2018; Senior Qatari Military Officer, interview with author. See also: Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, “Speech of the State of Qatar by His Highness Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 25 September 2012), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/67/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020]; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, General Debate of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2019), available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/74/qatar> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁴⁰ Al-Attiyah, “Discussion with Qatar’s Minister.”

⁴¹ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

constructive relationships with all three countries strategically valuable and necessary: It saw Israel's close ties with the USA as useful insurance against the latter's retrenchment from the region,⁴² and considered Israeli cooperation essential to any progress on the Palestinian issue.⁴³ It did not join the Abraham Accords in 2020, insisting that Israel first had to make concessions in line with the Arab Peace Initiative, but was confident in its already constructive and long-standing relationship with the Israeli government.⁴⁴ Cordial relations with Tehran were existentially important for Doha to coordinate the administration of shared South Pars/North Dome natural gas field and, more recently, to maintain physical access to the outside world after its Arab neighbours had closed their land-, sea- and air borders to Qatar.⁴⁵ Turkey, meanwhile, emerged as Qatar's most important regional partner during the 2010s, sharing many of its positions on regional politics and offering tangible support to its national security, both at the political level, and by stationing troops in Qatar when the Gulf Crisis erupted in 2017.⁴⁶ Qatar henceforth provided significant economic support for Turkey,⁴⁷ and vocally defended its military operations for example against Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁸

⁴² Ian Black (Senior Visiting Fellow, London School of Economics), interview with author, 19 March 2019.

⁴³ Stephens, interview with author.

⁴⁴ See for example: Michael Kobi and Yoel Guzansky, "Might Qatar Join the Abraham Accords?" *INSS Insight*, 12 October 2020, available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-abraham-accords-and-qatar/>. [accessed 14 January 2020]; Michael Stephens, "Israel and the Gulf States: Normalisation and Lingering Challenges," *Royal United Services Institute*, 15 September 2020, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/commentary/israel-and-gulf-states-normalisation-and-lingering-challenges>. [accessed 17 September 2020].

⁴⁵ See for example: M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Dialogue"; Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, "The Crisis in the Gulf: Qatar Responds," (speech, Chatham House, London, 5 July 2017), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/file/crisis-gulf-qatar-responds> [accessed 25 June 2020]. Interviewees also consistently stressed the pragmatic nature of Qatar's relationship with Iran: Former Senior British Official, interview with author, 19 March 2019; Thomas Juneau (Associate Professor, University of Ottawa), phone interview with author, 30 May 2019; Hans-Udo Muzel (Ambassador of Germany to the State of Qatar), interview with author, 11 April 2018; Qatari Academic (A), interview with author; Qatari Academic (C), interview with author.

⁴⁶ Discussed in interviews with: Former Senior British Official, interview with author; Muzel, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; Qatari Academic (A), interview with author; Qatari Academic (C), interview with author.

⁴⁷ See for example: Al-Jazeera, "Qatari Emir Vows \$15bn Turkey Investment after Erdogan Meeting," 16 August 2018, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2018/08/16/qatari-emir-vows-15bn-turkey-investment-after-erdogan-meeting/>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁴⁸ Lolwah Al-Khater, "Fireside Chat," interview by Kimberly Dozier (Global Security Forum, Doha, 15 October 2019), available at: <https://youtu.be/aAC-5E3if0Q> [accessed 25 June 2020]; M. b. A. Al-Thani, "A View from Qatar"; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, "Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar, to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar," *Government Communications Office*, 21 July 2017, available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

11. 2. 2. A Multi-Polar Order

Qatar also saw Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Iran as counterweights to balance Saudi Arabia's power in the region. Generally, however, and this is the second key component of the regional security framework it aspired to, Qatar opposed organising regional affairs around the power of individual countries. It saw the designation — formal or informal — of regional leaders as inevitably limiting its own independence. It wanted a regional “architecture in which there are no regional leaders,” or one that is at least “designed to contain”⁴⁹ them; it certainly “does not want any hegemonic power in the Middle East — this is a red line.”⁵⁰ In abstract terms, Qatar sought a region that was neither uni-polar, nor bi-polar, but rather multi-polar or, ideally, non-polar.⁵¹

Qatar did not want any single regional power to dominate the MENA (nor its Arab core), not least because it recognised that Saudi Arabia would be the most likely Arab candidate for this position. Qatari leaders frequently acknowledged Saudi Arabia's special status and regional influence, describing it as “the backbone of the GCC,”⁵² as having the “role to try to solve problems around the region,”⁵³ and — even after 2017 — as Qatar's natural “ally and our brothers.”⁵⁴ Yet, as the previous chapter explains, making itself independent from Saudi Arabia had been the defining feature of Qatar's foreign policy since the mid-1990s. The experiences of 2017 confirmed long-standing Qatari fears of Saudi hegemony, whether exercised by the Kingdom alone, or in concert with other Arab states.⁵⁵ Closely related, Qatar also opposed the emergence of structures that could formalise the MENA's division into two distinct and mutually exclusive blocs. For example, it consistently resisted Washington's Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) initiative, arguing that regional security arrangements had to be inclusive of all key stakeholders, rather than being

⁴⁹ Stephens, interview with author.

⁵⁰ Qatari Academic (C), interview with author.

⁵¹ Discussed in interviews with: Hokayem, interview with author; Kinninmont, interviews with author; Andreas Krieg (Assistant Professor, King's College London), interview with author, 14 February 2019; Neil Quilliam (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 26 February 2019; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

⁵² Al-Thani, “Qatar's Prime Minister.”

⁵³ Al-Thani, Tamim bin Hamad, “A Conversation with His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani,” (speech, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 26 February 2015), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/engagements/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁵⁴ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Exclusive Interview,” interview by Marc Perelman, *France 24*, 17 September 2018, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXCi7NsDmTc> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁵⁵ Discussed in interviews with: Miller, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; Harold Walker (former British Ambassador to the UAE), interview with author, 29 March 2019; Wright, interview with author.

directed against a specific country, in this case, Iran.⁵⁶ This conviction, too, was reinforced by the 2017 Gulf Crisis, which also significantly undermined Qatar's belief in the GCC as a useful body for regional cooperation.⁵⁷

If regional affairs had to be defined by competing powers, Qatar preferred for this to be between at least three sides (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey). It wanted to avoid situations in which it had to align itself entirely with any single regional power without retaining the ability to hedge. Moreover, Qatar was also more comfortable forming an alliance with a regional power like Turkey, in which it has something to offer — other than its wealth — that its partner lacked, namely that it was an Arab state in the predominantly Arab MENA. One senior Qatari academic explained, however hubristic it may seem, Qatar's leaders “believe that they can manage introducing the Turks to the region,”⁵⁸ functioning as Ankara's interlocutor to the Arab world. In addition to being geographically far away from Qatar, and therefore less capable of physically dominating it than Saudi Arabia or Iran, Turkey also did not have the same potential to affect Qatar's domestic politics through appeals to shared tribal-, Gulf- or Arab identities as Saudi Arabia (or another Arab state).

11. 2. 3. An Externally Guaranteed Order

Ultimately, however, Qatar sought a regional order in which regional powers were prevented from treating smaller states (like Qatar itself) “as mere spheres of influence.”⁵⁹ The third component of Qatar's conception of regional stability was therefore that it wanted external powers — ideally the USA or international institutions like the UN — to enforce adherence to the basic principles of the rules-based international system in the region. Qatar believed that, wherever possible, stability was best served by regional states taking “control of the

⁵⁶ See for example: Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Special Dialogue,” interview by Declan Walsh and Matthew Karnitschnig (Mediterranean Dialogue, Rome, 22 November 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCfAXXtK6dA> [accessed 26 June 2020]; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Statement,” (speech, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 17 February 2019), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2MD_ieTM6k [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁵⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Qatari Academic (B), interview with author; Qatari Academic (C), interview with author. See also: Khalid Al-Attayah, “Gulf Crisis: Is There a Risk of a Military Escalation?” interview with Daren Abugahida, *Talk to Al-Jazeera*, 2 August 2017, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2017/08/gulf-crisis-risk-military-escalation-170802110541033.html> [accessed 26 June 2020]; Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “In Conversation with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar,” interview by Ahmad Dallal (Georgetown University Qatar, Doha, 2 April 2019), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWWhXmxzkkHY> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁵⁸ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁵⁹ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session).

region for themselves.”⁶⁰ Yet, as outlined above, it also wanted external powers to support regional initiatives (as with the 2011 Libya intervention); to guarantee the physical security of (particularly small) regional states and their vital interests (e.g. deterring a military attack on Qatar by its neighbours and maintaining freedom of navigation in the Gulf); and to arbitrate regional disputes if needed. A statement by Tamim bin Hamad neatly summarises this: “we [the countries in the region] should do our own work and then we should ask the Americans if we need help to help us solve our problems.”⁶¹ In fact, both before and after 2017, Qatar demonstrated its acceptance of international arbitration in conflicts it could not resolve with its neighbours. This included Qatar’s dispute with Bahrain over the Hawar islands, which was resolved by the International Court of Justice in 2001,⁶² and multiple cases it brought to international courts over the actions taken against it by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt since June 2017.⁶³

11. 2. 4. Size Does Not Matter

Finally, building on the three components outlined above, Qatar wanted the means countries could legitimately leverage to influence regional affairs to exclude, as much as possible, military power and size. Qatar recognised that Egypt’s large population and military (and its historic regional leadership role), for example, afforded it regional clout, for better or worse, that other Arab states could not match; even after Egypt joined the boycott against Qatar in 2017, Qatari leaders like Al-Attiyah maintained that “Egypt’s stability is the region’s stability.”⁶⁴ In general, however, Qatar wanted states’ abilities to affect regional politics to be determined by their diplomatic effectiveness, readiness to engage in economic cooperation, and instruments of soft power, such as media reach and status acquired through contributions to Arab and regional causes (e.g. Palestinian statehood). Unsurprisingly, these were precisely the areas in which Qatar considered itself well-positioned. Qatar wanted the MENA to be a region

⁶⁰ Stephens, interview with author.

⁶¹ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “A Conversation.”

⁶² Krista E. Wiegand, “Bahrain, Qatar, and the Hawar Islands: Resolution of a Gulf Territorial Dispute,” *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 1 (2012), 79-96. Also discussed in interview with: Wright, interview with author.

⁶³ See for example: Al-Jazeera, “UN’s Top Court Backs Qatar in Air Blockade Row with Neighbours,” 14 July 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/14/uns-top-court-backs-qatar-in-air-blockade-row-with-neighbours/>. [accessed 19 February 2019]; Eric Knecht and Dmitry Zhdannikov, “Qatar Sues Luxembourg, UAE, Saudi Banks in FX Manipulation Case,” *Reuters*, 8 April 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-currency-idUSKCN1RK1FJ>. [accessed 19 February 2019].

⁶⁴ Al-Attiyah, “Gulf Crisis.”

in which “rich states participate in the development of less rich states,”⁶⁵ and has demonstrated its willingness to support the economies of countries across the region, including with aid, loans and investments.⁶⁶ It hoped that this generosity would bring it influence with recipients, popular support across the region, and approval from external powers. For example, Qatar’s financial support for Gaza was intended to give it a politically moderating sway over Hamas, regional accolades for supporting the Palestinians, and appreciation from the USA and Israel for helping to prevent Gaza’s complete economic collapse.⁶⁷

Despite its appeals to Arab unity and regional inclusiveness, Qatar did not expect all MENA countries to be friends or refrain from competition; it clearly worked to set itself apart from its neighbours, while relishing opportunities to present itself as a mediator in intra- and inter-state conflicts. In an interview, a senior Qatari diplomat expressed her conviction that Qatar “can play a role in defusing this polarisation that exists”⁶⁸ between Arab states and Iran or Turkey, for example. Ultimately, Qatar insisted that all conflicts in the region — regardless of Qatar’s role in them — should initially be addressed through dialogue. In 2014, Al-Attiyah acknowledged that “we might be somewhat extreme in our thirst for dialogue,”⁶⁹ five years later he maintained that in Qatar’s view “meeting, and discussing things face to face, is the shortest way to bringing stability to the region.”⁷⁰ It wanted coercive measures to be applied only upon reaching a modicum of regional consensus (i.e. one that included Qatar itself), and preferably in coordination with external powers like the USA.

In sum, Qatar’s conception of a regional order it considered conducive to stability in the MENA was derived from what it saw as its strengths and vulnerabilities, and was shaped by its experiences during the 2010s. It wanted regional politics to be organised to prevent scenarios like the 2017 Gulf Crisis,

⁶⁵ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁶⁶ See for example: Ana Echagüe, “Qatar: The Opportunist,” in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid: FRIDE, 2015), 63-75; Kamrava, *Qatar*; David B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State* (London: Hurst & CO, 2017); David B. Roberts, “Qatar Shuffles Back to the Future,” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 13 December 2018, available at: <https://agsiw.org/qatar-shuffles-back-to-the-future/>. [accessed 12 March 2019].

⁶⁷ Discussed in interviews with: Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author; Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author. See also: Sultan Barakat, “The Qatari Spring: Qatar’s Emerging Role in Peacemaking,” (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012); David B. Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar’s ‘Islamist’ Soft Power,” (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 2019).

⁶⁸ Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author.

⁶⁹ Al-Attiyah, “Qatari Foreign Policy Today.”

⁷⁰ Al-Attiyah, “Fireside Chat.”

and to instead resemble conditions that briefly prevailed at the beginning of the decade. From Qatar's perspective, the regional order had to protect the sovereignty and independence of the MENA's smallest states — most importantly Qatar itself — from the region's larger powers. Qatar wanted the regional system to be inclusive of all its members, including the non-Arab states, and prevent any one or two regional powers from dividing the rest of the region into spheres of influence. Ultimately, while Qatar hoped for, and believed in, regional dialogue to resolve conflicts, it wanted external powers, ideally the USA, to guarantee the minimum adherence of all regional states to the core tenets of the rules-based international system.

11. 3. State-Level Order

In Qatar's conception of stability in the MENA, the internal order of the region's individual states mattered primarily insofar as it impacted regional affairs. In Qatar's view, instability in one state was likely to negatively affect the stability of the wider region, particularly where it escalated into violent conflict, created conditions for extremist groups to proliferate, and attracted intervention from competing external and regional powers. Besides states' abilities to maintain peace within their borders, it was generally more important to Qatar that governments were favourably disposed to the kind of inclusive and consultative regional order it wanted to see — and, naturally, towards Qatar itself — than the political systems they presided over. One Doha-based academic concluded that from Qatar's perspective, governments in the region had to subscribe to “the idea is that there is a rules based system, but the political system [of these countries] doesn't really matter as long as its legitimate and at least supported by the people.”⁷¹ In some instances, Qatari assessments of the legitimacy of other countries' political systems — at least those communicated publicly — appeared more dependent on the state of Qatar's bilateral relationship its government, than any other consideration. For example, while Qatari officials and commentators lauded the popular legitimacy of fellow Gulf monarchs during the first half of the 2010s,⁷² since June 2017 they suggested that government repression was undermining political stability in Saudi Arabia, the UAE or

⁷¹ Wright, interview with author.

⁷² H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2012; H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2014.

Bahrain.⁷³ One Qatari academic argued that there would be “a very violent second Arab Spring very soon [...] the Saudis cannot live like this.”⁷⁴

11. 3. 1. Political and Economic Reform

Qatar had no comprehensive vision of what kind of political and economic structures were most conducive to stability, much less a strategy to support the formation of such structures in Arab states across the MENA. During the early 2010s, Qatari leaders like Hamad bin Jassim often expressed their belief that Arab monarchies — including Qatar itself — enjoyed more popular legitimacy than the nominally republican states in the region,⁷⁵ but Qatar also consistently emphasised that “there is no one size fits all”⁷⁶ solution that could be applied to countries like Egypt, Syria or Tunisia. Qatar’s narrative frequently tied the future stability of Arab states to their democratisation and the expansion of freedom of expression and other political rights. For example, Mohammed Al-Kuwari, Qatar’s Ambassador in the USA from 2014-2016, said that “through democracy we can have a lot of stability in our region;”⁷⁷ and in his speech to the 2015 UN General Assembly, Tamim bin Hamad called for states in the MENA to adopt “an approach based on the rule of law, transparency, justice and human dignity.”⁷⁸ Given Qatar’s own far from democratic political system and the frequent international criticism of its human rights record,⁷⁹ these statements could appear hypocritical and designed to pander to American and European audiences. It was clear that even if Qatar were to hold long-promised elections for the Shura Council, as mandated by its 2003 constitution, actual political power would likely remain concentrated in the hands of the Emir.⁸⁰

Yet, dismissing Qatar’s pro-democracy rhetoric as a public relations ploy was too simplistic. Claims such as those by then-Foreign Minister Al-Attiyah in 2015

⁷³ See for example: Lolwah Al-Khater, “The Gulf Crisis & the GCC Regional Balance,” interview by Tim Constantine (Gulf International Forum, Washington DC, 29 March 2019), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmlHPD6wwvc> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁷⁴ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁷⁵ For example: H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2012; H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2014.

⁷⁶ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁷⁷ Mohammed Jaham Al-Kuwari, “‘Understood’ and ‘Misunderstood’: A Conversation with H.E. Mohammed Jaham Al Kuwari,” (speech, National Council on US Arab Relations, Washington DC, 1 April 2014) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu8R7C9mBac> [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁷⁸ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness,” (70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

⁷⁹ See for example: Amnesty International, “Country Profile: Qatar,” available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/qatar/>. [accessed 12 January 2021]; Human Rights Watch, “Country Page: Qatar,” available at: <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/qatar>. [accessed 12 January 2021].

⁸⁰ Stephens, interview with author. For detail see: Roberts, *Qatar*.

that “we have our own democracy which everybody is happy with,”⁸¹ or his predecessor Hamad bin Jassim’s declaration in 2011 that the government in Doha believed in a “democratic life”⁸² as the basis for the region’s future stability, did not make Qatar a champion of liberal democracy. But they reflected the Qatari leadership’s conviction that stability at the state-level required leaders and governments to secure popular support. According to one Qatari academic, “the equation is very simple: the people have to be happy.”⁸³ Here, Qatar’s own domestic environment served as its primary point of reference; there was no reliable polling, but observers generally agreed that the lack of a political opposition in Qatar was not just due to the country’s authoritarian system, but also an expression of the Emir’s — first Hamad bin Khalifa and then Tamim bin Hamad — genuine popularity.⁸⁴

In Qatar’s view, a ruler’s legitimacy was tied to their demonstrated commitment “to help their people directly and to create jobs.”⁸⁵ Yet, apart from generous offers of financial assistance, Qatar had no articulated proposals for how states not blessed with the natural resources wealth it had at its disposal could facilitate the development of their national economies.⁸⁶ Instead, its focus — and its references to Qatar as a model for others to emulate — tended to be on the conduct of governments and, frequently, individual leaders. Qatar’s idea of “good governance,” as defined by Tamim bin Hamad, was centred around leaders demonstrating “justice, honesty and [acting as a] good example.”⁸⁷ How political leaders attained power — whether they were elected, inherited power or were otherwise nominated — was less consequently. It was much more important that leaders engaged in some form of public consultation that was experienced as genuine by their populations,⁸⁸ be it through elected or appointed parliaments and advisory councils, or the Majlis system customary in

⁸¹ Khalid Al-Attayah, “The Headliner: Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid Al-Attayah,” interviewed by Mehdi Hassan, *Up Front*, 31 October 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9vDs3PVeCE> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁸² Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Special Address, HE Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabor Al-Thani” (speech, World Economic Forum 2011, Dead Sea, 23 October 2011), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD875jb1tiM> [accessed 12 February 2019].

⁸³ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

⁸⁴ Discussed in interviews with: Krieg, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author.

⁸⁵ H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2014.

⁸⁶ Stephens, interview with author.

⁸⁷ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech.”

⁸⁸ Qatari leaders have emphasised the need consultation between governments and their populations throughout the decade. For examples see: M. b. A. Al-Thani, “In Conversation”; H. b. J. Al-Thani, “Special Address”; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness,” (69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

the Gulf region.⁸⁹ To this end, Qatar also advocated for a modicum of freedom of expression that allowed at least some public criticism of government policies. It therefore promoted its own Al-Jazeera network as “an independent source of information for millions of people”⁹⁰ enabling populations across the region “to understand what’s going on and to discuss their views freely.”⁹¹ However, there were clear limits to the level of free speech the Qatari government tolerated at home. Critical reporting about domestic politics rarely featured on Al-Jazeera; national news outlets were relatively bland, and while public criticism of government ministers was generally allowed, the Emir and his decisions were strictly off-limits.⁹²

Nevertheless, and even if only because the leadership in Doha felt that its power was secure, in Qatar’s view stability required governments to achieve popular support and/or acquiescence through means other than blunt and violent repression. According to one Qatari commentator, “there is no correlation between happiness and democracy, but there is a correlation between happiness and not having authoritarian regimes killing people in the streets.”⁹³

11. 3. 2. Space for Islamism

Qatar’s belief that political leaders needed broad societal support was relevant to understanding how political Islam fit into its conception of stability in the MENA. In fact, the topic combined Qatar’s general — some argue “quite idealistic”⁹⁴ — views about politics in the region, and the notion that Qatar hoped to see governments that were friendly towards it. Qatar’s relationship with political Islam was the most discussed aspect of its regional foreign policy

⁸⁹ Various authors have highlighted the Majlis system in the Gulf as one of the factors that has contributed to the longevity of the Gulf monarchies; see for example: Allen James Fromherz and Javier Guirado Alonso, “The Secret of the Sheikhs,” *Foreign Affairs*, 28 October 2019, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2019-10-28/secret-sheikhs>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹⁰ Yousef Al-Khater, “Qatar’s Crisis Can Only End If We Sit Down Together and Resolve It as Brothers,” *The Telegraph*, 5 July 2017, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/05/qatars-crisis-can-end-sit-together-resolve-brothers/>. [accessed 25 June 2020].

⁹¹ Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, “Interview Transcript: Qatar’s Sheikh Hamad,” interview by Martin Dickson and Roula Khalaf, *Financial Times*, 24 October 2010, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/9163abca-df97-11df-bed9-00144feabdc0> [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹² Discussed in interviews with: Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author. See also: Reuters, “Qatari Poet Sentenced to 15 Years in Prison for Insulting Emir,” 21 October 2013, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-poet-court-idUSBRE99K0LM20131021>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

⁹³ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author. For statements by various Qatari leaders also denouncing heavy-handed government repression as destabilising see for example: Al-Attayah, “Syria and the Regional Impact”; T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness,” (70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly); T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Address by His Highness,” (74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly).

⁹⁴ Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

during the 2010s, and therefore merits particular attention in this chapter. As the literature review in Chapter 5 notes, Qatar has sometimes been portrayed as ideologically committed to supporting Islamist governments wherever possible, not least by its neighbours in the Gulf. Qatari leaders and officials, meanwhile, routinely denied having preferences for specific political groups anywhere in the region.⁹⁵ The truth was somewhere in between: Qatar worked closely with Islamist politicians and groups throughout the 2010s (and before), but for reasons that included pragmatism, convenience and happenstance at least as much as ideological affinity or strategic considerations. Throughout, it clearly mattered that Qatar's leadership did not worry about Islamist opposition to its own rule, with the local MB chapter having disbanded in 1999.⁹⁶ Otherwise, four overlapping and mutually reinforcing factors were important:

Firstly, and as discussed elsewhere in this thesis,⁹⁷ Qatar's understanding of the internal dynamics of other Arab states, particularly during the Arab Uprisings, was shaped by a small number of individuals. There was a mismatch between Qatar's ambition to have an active regional (and global) foreign policy, and its bureaucratic capacity, constrained not least by the country's small population. This remained relevant throughout the 2010s despite the expansion and increasing professionalisation and institutionalisation of Qatar's diplomatic service.⁹⁸ One side effect of this was that Qatar's regional foreign policy was influenced by many of the dissidents from across the Arab world who had been allowed to live and work in Qatar over the decades. Reflecting the political realities in the MENA, this included members and sympathisers of the MB and other Islamist groups, some of whom built close personal relationships with Qatari leaders and officials, and became influential voices in Al-Jazeera's

⁹⁵ See for example: Khalid Al-Attiyah, "Atlantic Exchange Featuring Dr Khalid Bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah," (speech, The Atlantic, Washington DC, 2 February 2015), available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/live/events/atlx-Foreign-Minister-Al-Attiyah/2015/> [accessed 26 June 2020]; M. b. A. Al-Thani, "Dialogue"; H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2012.

⁹⁶ See for example: 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 (2017), 479-500; Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, "The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?" *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017), 129-53; David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (2014), 84-94.

⁹⁷ See both the literature review in Chapter 5 and the analysis in Chapter 10.

⁹⁸ Discussed in interviews with: Consultant to the Qatari Government, interview with author, 2 April 2018; Chris Doyle (Director, Center for Arab British Understanding), interview with author, 29 March 2019; Krieg, interview with author. See also: Mehran Kamrava, "The Foreign Policy of Qatar," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 157-84. Roberts, "Reflecting on Qatar's 'Islamist' Soft Power."

programming and other Doha-based institutions.⁹⁹ One analyst assessed — and many others interviewed for this thesis concurred — that, to an extent, Qatar’s regional foreign policy “is hostage to the interlocutors they have in different countries.”¹⁰⁰ One frequently cited example was the Doha-based Libyan cleric Ali Al-Sallabi, who was an instrumental link between Qatar and the part of the Libyan political landscape that, even if not homogeneously Islamist, certainly saw no contradiction between political Islam and stability.¹⁰¹

Secondly, and related to the above, political developments across the MENA immediately following the Arab Uprisings appeared to affirm what Qatari leaders were being told by their interlocutors. In many Arab states, the most organised and apparently most popular alternative to fallen or beleaguered governments “were Islamists and namely the Muslim Brotherhood.”¹⁰² This Qatari assessment was shared by governments and observers around the world,¹⁰³ and reinforced by events in 2011 and 2012. These included Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi’s arrival in Tunisia to a hero’s welcome in January 2011 and his movement’s subsequent electoral successes;¹⁰⁴ the appointment of former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group leader Abdelhakim Belhadj to head the Tripoli Military Council in August 2011;¹⁰⁵ and the victory of the MB’s Mohammed Morsi

⁹⁹ Roberts has written extensively on Qatar’s practice of hosting dissidents from across the region in Doha. See for example: David B. Roberts, “Qatar and the Arab Spring: From Arbiter to Actor to Activist,” in *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State*, (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2017), 123-148; Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar’s ‘Islamist’ Soft Power.”

¹⁰⁰ Hokayem, interview with author. Also discussed in interviews with: Krieg, interview with author; Stephens, interview with author; UK-based Academic (A), interview with author; UK-based Libya Analyst, phone interview with author, 3 December 2019.

¹⁰¹ Roberts, in particular, has written about Qatar’s relationship with the Al-Sallabi brothers; see for example:

Roberts, “Behind Qatar’s Intervention in Libya”; David B. Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring,” *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017), 544-562; Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar’s ‘Islamist’ Soft Power.”

¹⁰² Qatari Academic (A), interview with author.

¹⁰³ Various works on the Arab Uprisings and their aftermath have captured this; see for example: Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015); Fawaz Gerges, *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012).

¹⁰⁴ Al-Jazeera Arabic, “Rachid Ghannouchi Returns to Tunisia [راشد الغنوشي يعود إلى تونس]”, 29 January 2011, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2011/1/29/راشد-الغنوشي-يعود-إلى-تونس> [accessed 26 June 2020]; BBC, “Tunisian Islamist Leader Rachid Ghannouchi Returns Home,” 30 January 2011, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12318824>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

¹⁰⁵ Al-Jazeera Arabic, “Belhaj: We Won against the Gaddafi Regime [بالحاج: انتصرنا على نظام القذافي]”, 23 August 2011, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2011/8/23/بالحاج-انتصرنا-على-نظام-القذافي> [accessed 26 June 2020]; BBC, “Libya Unrest: Rebels Overrun Gaddafi Tripoli Compound,” 23 August 2011, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14630702>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

in Egypt's first democratic presidential elections in 2012.¹⁰⁶ From Qatar's perspective, Islamist politicians and parties seemed to not just embody the region's popularly mandated political future, building close ties with them also looked to be the best bet to secure friendly relationships between Doha and the new political leaderships in Tunis, Tripoli, Cairo and elsewhere.

Thirdly, the apparent popularity and electoral success of Islamists was consistent with what Qatar regarded as the prevalence of religious conservatism across much of the Arab world. According to a number of analysts with substantial experience of working in Qatar, the leadership in Doha generally believed that an "Islamic instinct,"¹⁰⁷ encompassing as a basic sympathy for political Islam, was "inherent in the region,"¹⁰⁸ including amongst Qatari society itself.¹⁰⁹ In 2012, Hamad bin Jassim explained that in his view Arab governments must "respect the main rules of the religion."¹¹⁰ He further suggested that amongst the reasons some governments in the region had lost legitimacy was that they "thought that they can run their country like any European country" — meaning by disregarding Islamic values. Similarly, in an interview, a senior Qatari diplomat argued that the Arab Uprisings had merely opened space for populations to freely express their desire for more Islamically-orientated governance: Islamists "were always there, but you refused to see them, you pushed them to the margins, you confiscated the public sphere."¹¹¹

This links to the fourth factor: Qatar considered tolerating and including Islamists in political processes as necessary conditions for the stability of Arab states, and the region as a whole. It believed that forcefully excluding Islamists would only lead to their radicalisation. Qatari leaders and officials consistently made this argument throughout the 2010s. While they affirmed their commitment to international counter-terrorism efforts, they also persistently warned that "we have to pay attention to a simple equation [...] that violence,

¹⁰⁶ Al-Jazeera Arabic, "Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's First Civilian President [مرسي أول رئيس مدني لمصر]," 24 June 2012, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2012/6/24/مرسي-أول-رئيس-مدني-لمصر>. [accessed 26 June 2020]; David D. Kirkpatrick, "Named Egypt's Winner, Islamist Makes History," *The New York Times*, 24 June 2012, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/world/middleeast/mohamed-morsi-of-muslim-brotherhood-declared-as-egypts-president.html>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

¹⁰⁷ Kamrava, interview with author.

¹⁰⁸ Stephens, interview with author.

¹⁰⁹ Discussed in interviews with: Courtney Freer (Research Fellow, LSE Middle East Centre), interview with author, 14 February 2019; Stephens, interview with author. For more detail see: Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹⁰ H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2012.

¹¹¹ Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author.

persecution, repression and blocking the prospects of hope breed violence.”¹¹² Aside from the most extreme groups such as Daesh, Qatar therefore advocated for engaging even with Islamist groups that employed violence, including Hamas and factions of the Syrian opposition others consider beyond the pale. In interviews for this thesis, senior Qatari diplomats stressed their government’s conviction “that no one should be excluded, it doesn’t matter what they are;”¹¹³ and that “you cannot eradicate groups.”¹¹⁴ Instead Qatar called for encouraging these groups’ moderation through inclusion in the political process, or reducing their popular appeal by alleviating the popular grievances they drew on. In the words of Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “our war against terrorism is, in some cases, helping to preserve the bloodstained dictatorships that contributed to its rise.”¹¹⁵ Ultimately, at the heart of Qatar’s argument that Islamist groups should not be excluded from politics in the MENA was the same principle that stood behind its preference for engaging with external or regional powers even when it did not agree with their policies (e.g. Russia and Iran in Syria): they needed to be given a seat at the table, lest they became irreconcilable spoilers.

Qatar’s views about the compatibility of political Islam and stability in the MENA, and even its insistence that the latter’s inclusion was necessary for the former in many of the region’s states, remained consistent throughout the 2010s. Qatar did not change its position when Islamists lost influence and power in Tunisia, Libya or Egypt, pushed back by rival political forces, but also facing popular opposition. Tamim bin Hamad’s succession in 2013, and the significant pressure his government came under from its GCC neighbours in 2014 and after 2017 contributed to adjustments in Qatar’s policy priorities, including a reduction of its regional activism, but it did not fundamentally alter its stance on political Islam.¹¹⁶ To some extent, this could be understood as reflecting the constraints on Tamim bin Hamad to significantly change the course set by his father. In his

¹¹² T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Speech,” (35th GCC Summit). See also: M. b. A. Al-Thani, “The Crisis in the Gulf”; H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2014; Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 28th Arab League Summit, Amman, 29 March 2017), available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

¹¹³ Senior Qatari Diplomat (A), interview with author.

¹¹⁴ Senior Qatari Diplomat (B), interview with author.

¹¹⁵ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “Qatar’s Message to Obama.”

¹¹⁶ See for example: Fatiha Dazi-Héni, “Qatar’s Regional Ambitions and the New Emir,” *Middle East Institute*, 9 May 2014, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/qatars-regional-ambitions-and-new-emir>. [accessed 26 June 2020]; Andrew Hammond, “Qatar’s Leadership Transition: Like Father, Like Son,” *ECFR Policy Brief* 95 (2014); Roberts, *Qatar*, Chapter 10; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Foreign Policy Implications of the New Emir’s Succession in Qatar,” *NOREF Policy Brief* (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2013).

inaugural speech, the new Emir made clear that he saw his commitment to “continue the path laid out by this man who is actually the builder of the modern state of Qatar and the pioneer of its awakening”¹¹⁷ a core source of his own political legitimacy. Similarly, capitulating to the pressure from Qatar’s neighbours meant reneging on one of the signature elements of Hamad bin Khalifa’s legacy, namely policy independence from Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁸ However, Qatar’s consistency in this area also indicated that its leadership genuinely believed in the enduring relevance of political Islam for the future regional politics, and the need for including a variety of political views — Islamist and non-Islamist — even if they were opposed by powerful interests. Ultimately, however, Qatar’s position remained rooted in pragmatism. For example, Britain’s former Ambassador in Amman (2011-2015) said that he had “never seen any evidence of the Qataris trying to promote the Muslim Brotherhood”¹¹⁹ in Jordan, where it maintains good bilateral relations with a fellow Arab monarchy. In Tunisia, Qatar expanded ties with successive governments since 2011, even as the electoral fortunes of Ennahda have waxed and waned.¹²⁰

In sum, in Qatar’s conception, state-level stability depended on the conduct of political leaders and their ability to maintain popular support. Qatar had no particular views as to what kind of political systems were most conducive to political stability or how states could develop their economies. Instead, it focused on the need for governments to be as inclusive as possible of the spectrum of their populations’ political views. For Qatar, this also required that Islamists were permitted to participate in political processes, as attempts to forcefully exclude them — or anyone else — were likely to drive radicalisation. Throughout, Qatar’s views were shaped by its pragmatic desire to see states across the region led by governments favourably disposed towards Doha, and the particular convictions held by its most senior decision-makers.

¹¹⁷ T. b. H. Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech.”

¹¹⁸ Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE”; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (London: Hurst & CO, 2020).

¹¹⁹ Peter Millett (former British Ambassador to Jordan and Libya), phone interview with author, 25 November 2019.

¹²⁰ See for example: Giorgio Cafiero and Aicha El-Alaoui, “Opinion: Tunisia, a Gulf Crisis Battleground,” *The North Africa Journal*, 16 June 2020, available at: <http://north-africa.com/2020/06/opinion-tunisia-a-gulf-crisis-battleground/>. [accessed 26 June 2020]; Toby Matthiesen, “Renting the Casbah: Gulf States’ Foreign Policy Towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings,” in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44-60.

11. 4. Conclusion

Qatar's conception of stability in the MENA was reinforced and shaped by how it experienced the evolution of its strategic environment during the 2010s. Even before the Arab Uprisings, Qatar had adopted a foreign policy that combined pragmatic concern to secure itself as a small, but rich state in a difficult region, with the ambition to influence regional affairs. Qatar's leaders saw it in their country's interest to maintain the closest possible ties with the USA, but also to build relationships with other external powers; to work with traditional power centres in the region, but also to engage with state and non-state actors others considered beyond the pale; to establish Qatar as a flexible mediator and interlocutor with an "open door"¹²¹ for anyone willing to engage in dialogue; and to take risks and break regional norms — always from the security of facing virtually no domestic threat to their power. In the early 2010s, Qatar felt "comfortable with the pace and direction of change" it perceived to be underway in the MENA. Glimpsing a new regional order in which the international community backed regional initiatives to resolve regional conflicts, it saw friendly new political leaderships emerge in several Arab countries, and Qatar's strengths as a diplomatic, economic and media powerhouse were in great demand. But as the decade progressed, it saw its national security threatened and in 2017 come under direct attack from its neighbours in the Gulf in a regional environment it perceived as driven by zero-sum power politics enabled by international ignorance and negligence.

For Qatar, stability meant, first and foremost, the presence of structures that protected the sovereignty and regional independence of even the MENA's smallest states. Consequently, it wanted external powers — the UN Security Council's permanent members, but especially the USA — to act as guarantors for the regional order by upholding the basic principles of the international rules-based system enshrined in the UN Charter. Within the region, it wanted power to be as decentralised as possible, allowing neither a single state to dominate, nor two rivals to claim hegemony over spheres of influence that could restrict the foreign policy choices of smaller states to backing one side or the other. Within the context of the theory-focused literature about regional order outlined

¹²¹ Khalid Al-Attiah, "Qatar's Door Open to Peace in Gaza," *CNN*, 8 August 2014, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/opinion/al-attiyah-gaza-palestinians-israel-qatar/index.html>. [accessed 26 June 2020].

in Chapter 3, Qatar therefore aspired to a multilateral, collective security order in which states retained their autonomy, but were committed to cooperation,¹²² and that was guaranteed by an external and friendly — towards Qatar, most importantly — hegemon.¹²³ To an extent, the internal politics of the region's states were primarily relevant to Qatar's conception of stability insofar that it wanted them to be presided over by governments that subscribed to such a rules-based regional order and committed to resolving any inter-state disputes accordingly. It also wanted governments in the region to minimise the potential for violence inside their borders, lest intra-state conflicts could drive regional instability. Ideally, it naturally also wanted them to be favourably disposed towards Qatar itself.

Throughout, the defining feature of Qatar's conception of stability was an emphasis on inclusiveness. Understanding the MENA as comprising of many different, often competing, political and ideological currents, and a region that also attracted the interests of external powers with varying strategic agendas, Qatar saw the key to stability — and its own role therein — in bringing everyone together. As Hamad bin Jassim explained, “we believe by talking to every party maybe we can bring them together to talk.”¹²⁴ In part, this could be seen as reflecting Qatar's recognition that it did not have the power to exclude anyone from participating in regional affairs, even if it wanted to, and that only a regional order based on inclusiveness could safeguard against designs by others to isolate Qatar itself (as its neighbours tried to do from 2017-2021). However, Qatar's insistence on inclusiveness was also based on the genuine convictions that attempts to forcefully exclude specific states or non-state actors was liable to encourage their radicalisation and turn them into destabilising spoilers. From Qatar's perspective, this applied to Russia's involvement in the region, just as much as it did to the need to build a regional security architecture that engaged Iran rather than being constructed against it.

The same logic also played a role in Qatar's view that Islamists — with the exception of the most extremist groups such as Daesh — needed to be offered

¹²² This resembles the third stage of order outlined by Lake and Morgan; see: David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997).

¹²³ This is akin to Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's idea of a hegemonic order, but with the hegemon being external to the region itself; see: Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, “Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes,” *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), 731-753.

¹²⁴ H. b. J. Al-Thani, interview by Charlie Rose, 2012.

a way to participate in politics. Qatar believed that to prevent domestic instability, governments had to ensure their own popularity; its conception of stability therefore closely corresponded to the ideas outlined in Chapter 3 tying stability to government legitimacy and/or acquiescence from the population.¹²⁵ The political system their power derived from was less important; what mattered was that they engaged with their populations and recognised that repression could only work against the most egregious opponents that had no chance of garnering significant popular support themselves. Qatar saw political Islam as a widespread political current in the region that could not be suppressed and therefore had to be given space to prevent its radicalisation. The fact that the Qatari leadership itself did not fear a domestic Islamist opposition to its own rule and had long maintained good relationships with Islamist (and other dissident) activists and groupings, also played a role in its view that engagement with political Islam was a fundamental part of establishing stability in the MENA.

¹²⁵ As summarised by Hurwitz and Dowding and Kimber; see: Keith M. Dowding and Richard Kimber "The Meaning and Use of 'Political Stability'," *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983), 229-243; Leon Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability," *Comparative Politics* 5, no 3 (1973), 449-463.

12. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in Comparison

Three Versions of the Region

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar experienced the 2010s as a decade in which the region around them descended into instability, with deleterious consequences for their national security and regional interests. Throughout, Saudi, Emirati and Qatari leaders consistently described their respective countries as enclaves of stability at home, and as committed to (re)building stability in the MENA. The preceding six chapters explore how the three Gulf states made sense of their strategic environment during the decade following the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings, and analyse what the stability they professed to be pursuing looked like. It is clear that their perceptions of regional developments overlapped on some occasions, but diverged substantially on others. Likewise, their conceptions of stability in the MENA had some commonalities, but were also very different, and even appeared incompatible in many regards. This chapter compares and contrasts the findings of the three case studies. It draws together the answers to the thesis' dual research question and, ultimately, serves as the conclusion of the thesis' central analytical component.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. The first section outlines the similarities and differences in how the three countries understood their own roles in the MENA during the 2010s, as well as how they perceived each other's positions and behaviours. It shows that for Saudi Arabia, regional leadership was not optional, whereas taking on a prominent role in regional affairs involved more choice for Emirati and Qatari leaders. They perceived significant threats to their security, but their regional foreign policies were also more obviously driven by ambitions to elevate their small states' status within the region and beyond. The second section reviews and connects the six preceding chapters' overall arguments. It summarises how Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's assessments about what has driven instability in the MENA during the 2010s differed considerably, even as they all saw the region collapse into a general state of disorder. It further outlines how their ideas of what kind of order could yield stability — i.e. an environment in which they felt secure enough domestically

and able to protect and pursue their regional interests as freely as possible — consequently described three different versions of the MENA. These overall conclusions are then examined in greater detail in the third section. It compares and contrasts Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of their strategic environment during the 2010s and their conceptions of stability across the three levels of the thesis' analytical framework. It shows that all three saw the active engagement of external powers, especially the USA, in regional affairs as an essential building block of stability; that their ideas about regional order diverged substantially, particularly with regard to how they thought about regional leadership and the integration of non-Arab regional powers; and that their views about the stability of individual Arab states — beyond the fact that they all wanted governments friendly to their respective point of view — most obviously differ on the subject of if and how political Islam could be allowed to play a role.

12. 1. Regional Roles: One Default Leader, Two Opportunists

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar were the three Arab countries with the most active and ambitious regional foreign policies during the 2010s. The foundational assumption for this thesis is based on a scholarly consensus in the literature covering this period of the MENA's international relations. There were many similarities amongst the three countries: They were monarchies rooted in the history and traditions of the Arabian Peninsula with access to vast financial resources derived from their natural resource wealth. To protect themselves and their riches, they had been amongst the region's premier proponents of state sovereignty norms, and they had each developed national security strategies centred around close defence relationships with the USA. There were also obvious differences, especially between Saudi Arabia and its two smaller neighbours. Saudi Arabia had been a unique and central power in regional affairs since its establishment as a modern state in 1932, largely because of its size and status as the host of Islam's holiest sites. The UAE and Qatar, amongst the region's smallest states, only attained independence in 1971 and played mostly minor roles in regional affairs until the 2000s.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar experienced varying degrees of domestic political change during the 2010s. But while this altered decision-making

processes and stylistic approaches to foreign policy, shifts in their domestic policies did not fundamentally change their respective strategic outlook or direction. In the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed consolidated power as his sick half-brother and UAE President Khalifa bin Zayed faded into the background and Abu Dhabi's primacy within the country's federal system was reinforced by Dubai's financial troubles. In Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa's voluntary abdication in 2013 represented a break with Qatari and regional traditions, but simultaneously ensured a degree of continuity in the country's development direction. Tamim bin Hamad reduced Qatar's regional ambitions but did not fundamentally alter its foreign policy. In Saudi Arabia, the succession from King Abdullah to King Salman in 2015 went smoothly. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ascent brought significant domestic changes and led to a "rupture in style"¹ in the Kingdom's foreign policy, but without significantly changing its strategic outlook or self-perception as the default regional leader.

12. 1. 1. Self-Perceptions

As noted throughout the preceding chapters, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar were not prepared for the Arab Uprisings, much less for what they each assessed to be the region's descent into disorder in their wake. Their responses were based on what they each perceived as the need to protect their respective security interests, as well as the opportunity to expand their regional sway by influencing the changes taking place in many countries. In the UAE, a senior Emirati academic explained, "we don't live in a vacuum, we are part of this region, and if we sit like a duck, one day this danger and instability is going to come to us."² A similar rationale applied to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, particularly in an environment in which all three felt that their international partners, especially the USA, were not living up to their commitments to regional security. For Saudi Arabia, instability in neighbouring states like Bahrain and Yemen — in its view fuelled by Iranian interference — represented an intolerable threat to national security. It further saw the potential emergence of unfriendly governments, political chaos, or violent conflict in major Arab states like Egypt and Syria as detrimental to its regional interests. Perceiving the region in zero-sum terms, it could not accept to be outdone by rival contenders for regional

¹ John Jenkins (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 18, April 2019.

² Abdulkhaleq Abdulla (Professor Emeritus, UAE), interview with author, 23 July 2019.

leadership such as Iran or Turkey, nor by its smaller Arab neighbours. Given the Kingdom's self-image as the primary representative of the Arab and Islamic worlds on the international stage, Saudi Arabia considered itself duty-bound to play a leading role in all crises potentially affecting regional order. Riyadh also saw some opportunities in the wake of the Arab Uprisings as the prospect of regime change in Syria, in particular, appeared to offer the possibility of a government in Damascus that could move the country out of Iran's orbit. In general, however, Saudi Arabia saw its regional leadership role not as a matter of choice, but as its natural responsibility and, in no small measure, as a burden.

Emirati and Qatari leaders, meanwhile, had decided long before 2011 that irrespective of their countries' sizes, it was in their strategic interest to become prominent regional and international players. Conscious of the 1990 Kuwait scenario, both considered it a key objective of their foreign policies to make themselves useful partners to external powers such as the USA. One Qatari academic summarised the logic behind this: "In order to protect your wealth, your security, you have to have a regional and international role. Without this role, you will be eaten easily."³ Yet, the UAE and Qatari definitions of their regional roles were also driven by opportunism and self-confidence. As they saw the traditional Arab powers Egypt, Syria and Iraq being consumed by instability, Qatari leaders took the view that "in this void of no one in the region and no one externally taking a leadership role, why don't we take the leadership and make this happen."⁴ Similarly, amongst their Emirati counterparts, there was "a sense of if not us then who."⁵ The governments in Doha and Abu Dhabi saw an opportunity to gain regional influence and increase their international profiles, and they were confident that their countries could function as role models for other Arab states. Aware of their limitations as small states, both nevertheless saw themselves as regional pioneers with visions for the MENA's political and socio-economic development. According to Gargash, the UAE had "conceived the most progressive and successful model of government in the

³ Qatari Academic (C), interview with author.

⁴ Andreas Krieg (Assistant Professor, King's College London), interview with author, 14 February 2019.

⁵ Jonathan Fulton (Assistant Professor, Zayed University, UAE), phone interview with author, 23 April 2019.

region;”⁶ Mohammed bin Abdulrahman declared that “Qatar has been the most progressive country in that region.”⁷ Ultimately, however, seeking to influence the post-Arab Uprisings political transitions and conflicts across the region remained a discretionary choice for the UAE and Qatar. Their relatively selective approaches affirmed this. The UAE’s engagement in Syria, for example, remained limited during the 2010s, while Qatar’s involvement throughout the region waxed and waned throughout the decade.

12. 1. 2. Perceptions of Each Other

There were also considerable convergences and divergences in how Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar perceived each other’s roles and activities in the region. Here, too, there were significant similarities in the Emirati and Qatari perspectives, albeit with different outcomes. Having Saudi Arabia as a neighbour had always constituted a central strategic challenge for both Abu Dhabi and Doha. They saw the Kingdom as the Gulf and the MENA’s natural leading power, but they also considered both Saudi dominance — political, economic, military and religious-cultural — and domestic instability in Saudi Arabia as potentially existential threats. The Arab Uprisings reinforced Emirati and Qatari views that “if Saudi ever fails, for whatever reason that is, it is a country that will export its instability.”⁸ Likewise, and predating 2011, as they sought to protect their countries from the expansionist ambitions of powerful neighbours (i.e. to prevent the 1990/91 Kuwait scenario), they were primarily concerned about Riyadh (and, to a lesser extent, Tehran). Yet the ways in which they navigated this challenge diverged diametrically; particularly during the 2010s.

The UAE opted to form “a strategic alliance”⁹ with Saudi Arabia, building on areas of overlap in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh’s perceptions of the regional environment (different points of emphasis notwithstanding): Both detested popularly driven political revolutions for creating openings to destabilizing and hostile forces including Iran, Turkey and the MB. Meanwhile, the UAE liked the

⁶ Anwar Gargash, “Our Solution for Libya,” *The National*, 19 May 2019, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/dr-anwar-gargash-our-solution-for-libya-1.863113>. [accessed 10 July 2019].

⁷ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “Resolving the Gulf Crisis: Challenges and Prospects” (speech, Arab Centre Washington DC, Washington DC, 29 June 2017), available at: <http://arabcenterdc.org/events/resolving-the-gulf-crisis-challenges-and-prospects/> [accessed 12 July 2019].

⁸ Emile Hokayem (Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies), interview with author, 27 March 2019.

⁹ Ebtesam Al Ketbi (President, Emirates Policy Center), phone interview with author, 13 July 2020.

notion that Mohammed bin Salman's modernisation agenda in Saudi Arabia appeared to follow its own model — a former Emirati diplomat said that the UAE had pioneered “the model that I think they [Saudi Arabia] try to copy, not everything, but at least in part.”¹⁰ Regionally, Abu Dhabi saw cooperation with Saudi Arabia as the best way to achieve its own objectives, concluding that “you need to do it with the Saudis, you certainly couldn't do it against the Saudis.”¹¹

By contrast, since Hamad bin Khalifa's rise to power in 1995, Qatar defined itself as demonstratively independent from Saudi Arabia, including in its foreign policy. While generally seeking cordial relations with Riyadh, Qatar systematically built ties with other regional powers to balance against its most powerful neighbour. From Doha's perspective, the 2017 Gulf Crisis both represented the near-realisation of the worst threat to its national security and affirmed that it had been right to invest in relationships with Iran, Turkey and others in the region and beyond. The crisis also consolidated Qatar's perception that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were leading members of the counter-revolutionary current it identified as the principal driver of instability in the region during the 2010s. According to one Qatari academic, from Doha's perspective, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's objective was a regional order that was “strong, stable and secular — so strong meaning oppressive security regimes; stable, no change whatsoever of any kind; and secular, anti-Islamist and anti-popular.”¹²

In turn, the Gulf Crisis, both in its 2014 and 2017 iterations, also illustrated that Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceived Qatar's activities in the MENA during the 2010s as fomenting instability. The UAE saw Qatar not just as a rival small state that was also seeking to proliferate itself as a “valuable partner to the international community.”¹³ Abu Dhabi also regarded Doha as “a loner, a maverick,”¹⁴ bent on subverting the internal stability of important regional countries like Egypt and undermining GCC unity by promoting precisely the kind of Islamist political forces that “can be a threat or a risk against its members.”¹⁵ Saudi Arabia shared this view, but also considered the very notion of Qatar playing an independent role in regional affairs preposterous. Veteran Saudi

¹⁰ Najla Al Qassimi (Researcher, Dubai Public Policy Center), phone interview with author, 20 July 2020.

¹¹ Jenkins, interview with author.

¹² Qatari Academic (A), interview with author, 3 April 2018.

¹³ US-based Gulf Analyst (C), phone interview with author, 31 May 2019.

¹⁴ Abdulla, interview with author.

¹⁵ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

diplomat Bandar bin Sultan Al-Saud described Qatar as consisting of “only 300 people and a television channel,”¹⁶ and a state that “is not worth a mention or a reaction whatsoever.”¹⁷ Saudi Arabia’s efforts to isolate Qatar in 2017 belies this dismissive attitude, but the statements reflected Riyadh’s general view that smaller Arab states, and especially fellow GCC members like Qatar, should fall in line behind its leadership or, at the very least, not pursue foreign policies it disapproved of. The more favourable Saudi view of the UAE’s regional role was based on the strategic alignment between the two countries. Saudi Arabia considered the UAE a useful partner with strong military capabilities and a well-regarded and Saudi-friendly diplomatic presence in Washington; and to some extent as a model for achieving certain political and socio-economic development objectives. Ultimately, however, it still regarded it as an understudy in regional affairs, rather than an equal.

These similarities and differences in how Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar perceived their own and each others’ roles and behaviours in the MENA during the 2010s were reflected in the commonalities and divergences in their respective perceptions of regional developments during the decade and related conceptions of stability.

12. 2. Diverging Perceptions and Conceptions

In their final conclusions, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s perceptions of their strategic environment in the MENA during the 2010s were similar: All three assessed that the existing regional order — however fragile it had been before 2010 — collapsed over the course of the decade, that regional instability reached unprecedented levels and that this adversely affected, and on occasion directly threatened, their own respective national security and regional interests. According to Turki Al-Faisal, the MENA, long a “conflict-cursed region,”¹⁸ had

¹⁶ Courtney Trenwith, “Saudi Prince Ridicules Qatar as ‘Only 300 People and a Tv Station’” *Arabian Business*, 29 August 2013, available at: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/saudi-prince-ridicules-qatar-as-only-300-people-and-tv-station--515724.html>. [accessed 12 October 2020].

¹⁷ Bandar bin Sultan Al-Saud, “Prince Bandar Bin Sultan’s Interview on Israel-Palestine Conflict,” interview by Al-Arabiya Staff, *Al-Arabiya*, 5 October 2020, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/10/05/Full-transcript-Part-one-of-Prince-Bandar-bin-Sultan-s-interview-with-Al-Arabiya> [accessed 12 October 2020].

¹⁸ Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Keynote Speech by Turki Al-Faisal” (speech, 3rd Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, Berlin, 26 November 2013), available at: <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/mediathek/keynote-speech-by-prince-turki-al-faisal-at-the-3rd-berlin-foreign-policy-forum-656> [accessed 12 October 2020]. He used the same expression in 2016: Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Emerging Realities in the Middle East: A Saudi Perspective” (speech, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 9 November 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdgBCwmowKU> [accessed 12 October 2020].

descended into “a state of turmoil as never before.”¹⁹ Similarly, Gargash described how the region that had “been used to three crises at one time, is now undergoing six, seven crises at the same time;”²⁰ and Qatar’s Mohammed bin Abdulrahman opined that the 2010s saw “the most significant changes in the political and geographical landscape of the Middle East since the Sykes Picot Agreement.”²¹

Building on this shared sense of a region in profound disorder, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha also agreed that stability in the MENA required change — not just to alter or reverse developments that occurred during the 2010s, but much more fundamentally. Characterising any of the three countries’ conceptions of stability as advocating for a return to a pre-Arab Uprisings regional status quo is therefore simplistic and wrong. Preserving some aspects of the status quo — their own monarchical governance structures and the region’s state system, for example — played a key part in all three countries’ understanding of stability. Yet, to secure this, they saw the need for changes to the political and socio-economic orders of various Arab states, in the organisation of the regional order, and with regard to the engagement of external powers in the region. It is also notable that just as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar considered the MENA’s descent into instability as the result of the actions of others, rather than their own, the realisation of their respective conceptions of stability lay beyond their power as individual states. For all their political, military or economic capabilities, and regardless of their self-confidence and scale of ambition, establishing the kind of conditions they considered conducive to stability ultimately required changes — voluntary or coerced — in the attitudes and behaviours of other governments, non-state actors and populations, both in the region and beyond.

This was most obvious in the area in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s views about instability and stability were most aligned: All three were deeply concerned about what they perceived as the USA’s retrenchment from the

¹⁹ Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Keynote Address by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal” (speech, 26th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference, Washington DC, 19 October 2017), available at: <https://ncusar.org/aa/2017/10/the-middle-east-today-where-to/> [accessed 17 June 2019].

²⁰ Anwar Gargash, “In Conversation with Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash,” interview by Sunjoy Joshi and Harsh Pant, *ORF*, 21 March 2018, available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/conversation-dr-anwar-mohammed-gargash-cabinet-minister-minister-state-foreign-affairs-uae-strategic-relations-india-uae-crisis-middle-east/> [accessed 15 March 2019].

²¹ Mohamed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, “S R Nathan Distinguished Lecture 2016,” (speech, Middle East Institute, St Regis University, Singapore, 6 October 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSS-mk5mHac> [accessed 18 February 2019].

MENA during the 2010s, and all three considered the active engagement of the USA — and other external powers — in the MENA's regional affairs a fundamental component of stability. From Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha's perspective, American commitments to regional security wavered at precisely the moment it was most needed, allowing conflicts to escalate and leading to a pervasive sense of uncertainty. For all three, stability entailed a US government attuned to their respective national security concerns and leading international efforts to manage regional security. However, acknowledging changes in the global balance of power, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar also welcomed the involvement of other external powers, especially Russia and China, in the MENA, hoping to influence their approaches to the region to benefit their own respective agendas. The nuances in the three countries' views about the role of external powers are summarised in more detail below. But at this stage it is important to highlight the value placed on external involvement in the region as a common denominator, even as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of instability and conception of stability have diverged substantially in other areas.

The Arab Uprisings were a cataclysmic event in the perceptions of all three countries, but in different ways. From Saudi Arabia and the UAE's perspective, they precipitated the collapse of the regional order by opening a "lethal Pandora's box,"²² as Gargash put it, providing openings to destabilising and hostile forces. For Saudi Arabia, this was primarily about Iran fomenting and capitalising on the instability spreading in Arab states in pursuit of its goals of regional hegemony. It also saw Turkey and Qatar's regional behaviour as problematic, perceiving it as undermining various Arab governments, sponsoring potentially dangerous Islamist movements like the MB, and, crucially, further weakening much needed Arab unity vis-a-vis Iran. The UAE identified the same actors as driving instability but saw their behaviour through a different lens: In its view, the Uprisings had revealed and deepened societal divisions and given oxygen to what it regarded as the insidious and revisionist ideology of political Islam. It considered revolutionary Islamism (which or Abu Dhabi was embodied, instrumentalised and promoted by both Iran and its

²² Anwar Gargash, "Keynote Speech" (speech, EPC Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Abu Dhabi, 1 November 2015), available at: <https://epc.ae/storage/events/speeches/jjSn0wZgXuprArFonBoCbCqllbslkjorD9VvFanO.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2021].

network of Shia militias, and a nexus encompassing the MB and its affiliates, the Turkish and Qatari governments, and jihadist groups like Daesh and AQ) as the greatest threat to its national security, as well as the region's system of sovereign states and much needed political and socio-economic development. Qatar, finally, assessed regional disorder to be the result of legitimate popular demands for change being crushed by counter-revolutionary forces only concerned with their own power — both within individual countries and at the regional level. As the decade progressed, it saw some of these forces, led by the governments of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, turn against Qatar itself, seeking to punish it “for supporting the true aspirations of people”²³ in the region.

These different explanations for the MENA's descent into instability, combined with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's diverging self-perceptions, ambitions and interests, meant that their conceptions of stability described three very different versions of the region. Each was centred around a system of order — in many aspects more a collection of general ideas than a comprehensive or coherent vision — that addressed the most pressing issues from Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha's respective perspectives.

For Saudi Arabia, stability was primarily about the absence of a challenge to its regional leadership position, politically and strategically, but also ideologically. This primarily required the containment and roll-back of Iranian and Turkish influence in the MENA. Regarding other Arab states, Saudi Arabia had no specific political or socio-economic model it sought to impose, nor did it want to act as an active hegemon controlling all developments in the region. Instead, stability from Riyadh's perspective meant having Arab governments in place that were strong enough domestically to keep out Iranian and Turkish influence and prevent the emergence of any unwanted political and/or ideological movements that could transcend national borders, while ensuring that their international relations did not contradict the Kingdom's regional agenda.

The UAE's conception of stability, meanwhile, revolved around the protection and promotion of the political and socio-economic model it regarded as foundational to its own success and the most promising guiding example for the

²³ Meshal bin Hamad Al-Thani, “The Blockade on Qatar Is a Smokescreen. Here's What's Behind It,” *The Washington Post*, 22 June 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/22/the-blockade-on-qatar-is-a-smokescreen-heres-whats-behind-it/?utm_term=.43b2bac7dbaf. [accessed 18 February 2019].

region's development. It was defined by the maxim that the primary threat to this model, political Islam, had to be banished from the region to the greatest extent possible. From Abu Dhabi's perspective, this required capable Arab governments presiding over strong nation states. They needed to control the public spheres in their countries and only engage in political reforms if these did not create openings Islamists could exploit. Concurrently, to secure political legitimacy, governments needed to facilitate socio-economic development unencumbered by ideological zealots; ideally following the Emirati example. Regionally, the UAE saw stability in an environment in which the states it regarded as sponsoring Islamist groups – namely Turkey, Qatar and Iran – were ostracised until they abandoned their ideological pursuits. It sought a regional leadership structure centred around a core of like-minded Arab states that included Saudi Arabia and Egypt, whose domestic stability it was most concerned with, but who it also regarded as potential force multipliers for its own agenda.

For Qatar, finally, stability in the MENA meant an environment in which its sovereignty and independence as a small state was protected, but that also allowed it to leverage its diplomatic and financial strengths to influence regional affairs. At all levels, but particularly with regard to regional and state-level order, Qatar saw inclusiveness as a key component of stability. It believed that the best way to prevent states like Iran or non-state actors such as Islamist groups from radicalising and becoming destabilising spoilers was to include them in a dialogue process. Such arrangements also allowed Qatar to play its favoured role as a mediator and ensured that no individual power could establish itself as a regional hegemon capable of dominating the region. Although Qatar was not an advocate for democracy or an ideologically committed sponsor of Islamism, it considered it necessary for stability that governments were popular and believed that political Islam enjoyed broad support amongst Arab populations. It therefore regarded the inclusion of Islamist actors in the politics of Arab states as not only compatible with, but also helpful for stability.

12. 3. Three Levels of Alignments and Divergences

This thesis' analytical framework examines Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's conceptions of stability in the MENA across inter-related three levels: the role of external powers, the organisation of regional order and state-level order. This

final section returns to the three-tier structure to compare and contrast the findings of the preceding six chapters in greater detail and substantiate the summarised conclusions above.

12. 3. 1. The Role of External Powers

As noted, there was considerable alignment across Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's views about the role of external powers in the MENA. All three perceived the behaviour of the international community during the 2010s as enabling regional instability; and their conceptions of stability all encompassed active US and international engagement in the region — albeit within specific parameters. In a shifting global environment, they considered both continued US support for their respective national and regional security interests and expanding economic ties with Asian countries (especially China) as indispensable. They insisted that the impetus for solutions to regional problems should come from within the region itself, but they wanted external powers to reliably support their respective ideas for regional order.

For the three Gulf monarchies, the international community had a general responsibility for maintaining security in the MENA, not least due to the region's — and their own — centrality in world energy markets. In principle, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha saw the international rules-based system as enshrined in the UN Charter, and especially its emphasis on state sovereignty norms, as the best foundation for regional order. They notably only considered other actors — including each other — as acting in violation of these norms, while portraying their own regional policies as serving their preservation. However, even as they affirmed their commitment to the international order, appealed to international dispute mechanisms,²⁴ and complained about the international community's inaction, their conceptions of stability focused primarily on how they wanted the most important global powers — essentially the permanent members of the UN Security Council — to behave.

²⁴ This included long-standing calls for action from the UN Security Council on issues ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the war in Syria, as well as suits brought to international courts in the context of the Gulf Crisis. See for example: Eric Knecht and Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Qatar Sues Luxembourg, UAE, Saudi Banks in FX Manipulation Case," *Reuters*, 8 April 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-currency-idUSKCN1RK1EJ>. [accessed 19 February 2019]; Al-Jazeera, "UN's Top Court Backs Qatar in Air Blockade Row with Neighbours," 14 July 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/14/uns-top-court-backs-qatar-in-air-blockade-row-with-neighbours/>. [accessed 19 February 2019].

12. 3. 1. 1. Between Interventionism and Neglect

Close bilateral defence relationships with the USA (and some European countries) and trade with other external powers around the world were at the core of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's respective national security and economic strategies long before the 2010s. Meanwhile, regarding regional stability, the three have generally seen the involvement of external powers in the MENA as an imperfect balancing act between too much intervention and not enough engagement in the region. This was apparent in their perceptions of the regional environment over the past two decades. Saudi, Emirati and Qatari leaders consistently complained about external powers unilaterally imposing their agendas on the MENA. Frequently referenced examples included the 2003 Iraq War, the JCPOA, and the war in Syria (which, according to Al-Otaiba, was "moved above our [Arab states'] pay grade"²⁵ by US-Russian geopolitical competition).

Simultaneously, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha were united in their perception that the USA was reneging on its commitments to regional security, with deleterious consequences for the MENA's stability. In 2011, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were shocked by President Obama's call for Mubarak's resignation in Egypt and lack of support for the Bahrain monarchy — both long-time US partners. In 2013, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were appalled by Obama's decision not to militarily punish the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons, and all three considered Obama's 2016 description of America's partners in the region as "free riders"²⁶ an insult. Qatar was distressed by President Trump's apparent initial endorsement of the 2017 boycott launched against it by its neighbours, and the Saudi and Emirati governments were confounded by the unpredictability in the Trump administration's approach to Iran — ranging from the lack of an American response to the attacks on Saudi oil installations in September 2019 to the unexpected Soleimani assassination in January 2020.

There were some incidents of external engagements in regional conflicts during the 2010s that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar considered positive. This included the 2011 UN-mandated, NATO-led intervention in Libya (which

²⁵ Yousef Al-Otaiba, "A Conversation with His Excellency Yousef Al Otaiba, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States," (speech, RAND Events, Washington DC, 1 June 2016), available at: <https://www.rand.org/multimedia/audio/2016/06/01/UAE-event.html> [accessed 16 March 2019].

²⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> [accessed 15 September 2019].

afforded the UAE and Qatar, in particular, with ways to shape developments in the country), the US-led coalition against Daesh (although Saudi Arabia and Qatar wanted it to also target the Syrian regime) and, to a certain extent, the international endorsement of the Saudi-led coalition's declared objective to restore the government in Yemen in 2015²⁷ (Saudi Arabia and the UAE's rejection of all international criticism of their conduct of the war notwithstanding). In general, however, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha all considered the roles played by external powers in the MENA's strategic environment during the 2010s as a source of uncertainty and therefore instability. On balance, their concerns about external interventionism were outweighed by fears of international and especially US retrenchment from the MENA. Although they were able to purchase advanced US-made defence equipment and US military deployments to the Gulf even increased at times,²⁸ they felt that Washington's commitment to their national security and regional stability had become less reliable.

12. 3. 1. 2. Navigating a New World

From Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perspective, the US-led intervention to liberate Kuwait and protect the rest of the Arabian Peninsula from Iraq in 1990/91 represented the ideal case of external support for regional stability. However, since the early 2000s, and especially during the 2010s, the three assessed — however reluctantly, and perhaps not yet completely — that the USA was no longer willing or able to play the region's external hegemon. They had no immediate answer to this conundrum. Their conceptions of stability still ascribed a significant regional role to Washington in helping to constrain the behaviour of the various regional forces they perceived as destabilising and hostile. All still wanted to be regarded as “pre-eminent amongst the US allies in the region,”²⁹ and none of them saw a credible alternative to the US military to ensure their own national security. But in a shifting global and regional environment, they all considered, to varying degrees, how a more diffuse set of external powers could support their respective ideas for stability in the MENA.

²⁷ This included UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and the provision of technical military assistance to the coalition by the USA and the UK.

²⁸ See for example: Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, “Trump Didn't Shrink U.S. Military Commitments Abroad-He Expanded Them,” *Foreign Affairs*, 3 December 2019, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-03/trump-didnt-shrink-us-military-commitments-abroad-he-expanded-them>. [accessed 20 October 2020].

²⁹ Christopher Davidson (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), phone interview with author, 17 April 2019.

Their conclusions generally combined pragmatism and aspects of their self-perceptions.

The UAE was most dynamic in this regard. It focused on establishing itself as “as the most committed Gulf country to the principle of burden-sharing,”³⁰ leveraging its combined diplomatic, economic and military assets. It presented itself as a co-provider of regional security and the region’s economic bridgehead and foremost strategic interlocutor, hoping to retain favour in Washington, but also ready to capitalise on others’ interests and strengths. For example, viewed Russia and France as effective partners to counter the influence of political Islam and Turkey (and to a lesser extent Iran) in Syria and Libya; and it considered China’s state-controlled political and economic development model more compatible with its ideas of stability at the state-level than liberalising political reforms promoted by the USA or European countries.

For Qatar, the 2017-2021 Gulf Crisis affirmed its conviction that both US support and general international attention (such as ties with Iran and Turkey) were vital in preserving its national security. Lacking the power to prevent any external power from pursuing its interests in the MENA, it advocated for their inclusion in regional dialogue processes, coveting for itself the role of everyone’s diplomatic facilitator of choice. However, it ultimately concentrated primarily on making itself useful to the USA – hosting talks with the Taliban or maintaining channels of communications with Hamas – while its relationships with European countries, Russia and China remained mostly limited to bilateral matters.

Finally, Saudi Arabia shared some of the UAE’s views regarding the attractiveness of the Chinese model for state-level stability and hopes that Russia’s presence in Syria, for example, could be harnessed to reduce Iranian influence. Ultimately, however, its conception of stability was not just dependent on continued active US engagement in the region, but also on a specific US policy vis-a-vis Iran: It could not conceive of stability in the MENA without a USA committed to deterring, containing and, ideally, reversing Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia’s self-perception also meant that it was not content with adapting to the interests of other external powers. Instead, it wanted to be treated as an at least near-equal, commensurate with its global economic and

³⁰ Al Ketbi, interview with author.

religious clout, and to be recognised as the MENA's default international representative that at least had to be consulted on all regional developments.

In sum, active US engagement in the MENA remained central to the conception of stability of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. All three countries concluded that US hegemony in the region was likely a matter of the past and, to varying degrees, came to terms with having to think about regional stability in the context of a more dynamic global security landscape. To an extent, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha all hoped that some competition amongst external powers for influence in the MENA could be in their interest. Specifically, they hoped that increased Russian and Chinese engagement in the MENA could ensure continued US attention. As one American academic and former defence official put it, US partners in the Gulf have long been “flirting with those guys [Russia and China’s presidents] to make us jealous.”³¹ However, as they sought to hedge against US disengagement, it was also clear that all three dreaded a scenario in which rising US-China tensions could result in a bi-polar environment in which they may be forced to choose sides between their continued security dependence on the former and increasing economic reliance on the latter. At the end of the 2010s, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar were all outwardly confident that they could navigate a future US-Chinese rivalry. However, as one former Emirati diplomat acknowledged, an increasingly bifurcated international order “would be worrying, because we are in the middle”³² both geographically and strategically; a statement which can be understood as applying to Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well.

12. 3. 2. The Organisation of Regional Order

There were apparent differences in what — or, more precisely, who — Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar identified as the main drivers of regional instability during the 2010s. Their conceptions of a regional order that could yield stability in the MENA diverged accordingly, even as they shared similar points of departure.

As noted above, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha saw the region’s status quo state system as the essential foundation of stability. They viewed state sovereignty and non-interference norms — if necessary, guaranteed by external powers —

³¹ Former US Defence Official, interview with author, 15 October 2019.

³² Al Qassimi, interview with author.

as indispensable components of a system of order compatible with their core national security objectives, namely ensuring the continuation of monarchical rule at home, and (especially for the UAE and Qatar) retaining the ability to conduct independent foreign policies. At the same time, Saudi, Emirati and Qatari definitions of what constituted legitimate interventions in other states, as opposed to illegitimate interference and violations of sovereignty, were selective and subjective. All regarded their own behaviour during the 2010s as conforming to the norms, while accusing others of transgressions. Complaints about attacks on their own sovereignty by the respective other side were particularly prevalent in the context of the 2017-2021 Gulf Crisis.

12. 3. 2. 1. Different Priorities and Linkages

Aside from each other, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar considered the region's non-Arab states, Israel, Iran and Turkey, and as non-state actors (e.g. Daesh or Hizbollah) as the main drivers of instability in the MENA during the 2010s. However, their perceptions differed with regard to which of these actors they considered most problematic and how they understood the linkages between them.

None of the three Gulf states saw Israel as a major driver of regional instability during the 2010s, at least not by itself. They regarded the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts as a legacy issue affecting regional stability. In their view, the latter remained particularly salient amongst Arab and Muslim populations across the MENA, including their own, and could be exploited by extremist and revisionist regional forces. However, despite almost ritualistic references to the unresolved question of Palestinian statehood as a key impediment to regional stability, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha saw the behaviour of other regional actors as more immediately problematic. Crucially, in terms of their own security and regional interests, none of them perceived Israel as a direct threat or strategic competitor.

In general terms, all three Gulf states assessed Iran's regional behaviour — in the Gulf region and in various other Arab countries — as a major driver of instability. They also concurred that Daesh and other international jihadi terrorist groups posed an unacceptable threat. On the specifics, however, their perceptions diverged. For Saudi Arabia, Iran represented the defining challenge to regional stability. Riyadh saw in Tehran a revisionist actor that was bent on

subverting Arab states, gradually encircling the Kingdom, and that was “never going to stop”³³ in its pursuit of regional hegemony. It also understood Iranian-sponsored sectarian oppression and extremism (especially in Iraq and Syria) as a main driver behind the growth of Daesh and other Sunni jihadi terrorist groups. Qatar shared this interpretation to some extent. It saw Iran’s involvement in Syria, in particular, as part of a region-wide counter-revolution against Arab populations’ legitimate demands for change (during the 2017-2021 Gulf Crisis, Doha also denounced the Saudi and Emirati governments as belonging to this camp), but remained open to pragmatic bilateral engagement with Tehran. Moreover, Qatar saw the Saudi-Iranian competition for regional leadership as a major source of instability, threatening the independence of Arab states, including its own. Similar to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, finally, also assessed Tehran’s sponsorship of non-state actors as designed to systematically undermine Arab states’ sovereignty. It also regarded Iran as the primary conventional threat to its national security, manifested not least in the occupation of the Abu Musa and Tunbs islands and other Iranian military activity in the Gulf.

Abu Dhabi’s interpretation of the connection between Iran and groups like Daesh, however, was different. It regarded Tehran and its network of armed groups in various Arab countries, and Daesh, AQ and even unarmed Islamist groups like the MB as two sides of the same coin: they were all pursuing variations of the same “radical religious utopia”³⁴ that the UAE saw as fundamentally at odds with the region’s state system and its own political and socio-economic development model. Moreover, the UAE regarded Turkey and Qatar as main state-sponsors of the Sunni portion of this Islamist threat. In fact, judging Iran’s ideological appeal as mostly limited to Shia populations, it therefore saw Turkish regional influence as a more pressing strategic challenge in the region. Saudi Arabia shared this concern about Turkey’s regional ambitions, and political Islam more generally, but still regarded the challenge from Iran as more important. Qatar, meanwhile, found in Ankara its closest regional partner that shared its views on political developments in Arab states (discussed below), and could help it survive the isolation of the Gulf Crisis.

³³ US-based Gulf Analyst (C), interview with author.

³⁴ Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “The World Must Choose: Peace and Prosperity, or Iran's Clenched Fist,” *The Australian*, 9 May 2018.

12. 3. 2. 2. Three Systems of Order

These divergent perceptions were reflected in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's respective conceptions of stability. Their thinking about regional order converged on the notion that conflicts in and among Arab states should, at least initially, be resolved through Arab cooperation, but they had different ideas how what this should look like and how inter-Arab relations should be organised. As they were grappling with questions about regional leadership and the distribution of power, they considered existing regional bodies such as the Arab League or the GCC more as theatres of competition than as fora or instruments to be harnessed to resolve disputes. This preoccupation with regional balance-of-power dynamics also shaped their views of if and how the MENA's non-Arab states could be integrated into the regional order.

For Saudi Arabia, stability required that no other regional power was able to exert more influence over regional affairs or individual Arab states than itself. At least with regard to the Arab portion of the MENA, its conception of a stable regional order therefore most closely resembled Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's concept of a hegemonic order (see Chapter 3).³⁵ Riyadh insisted that it wanted only to be "left alone" and "a little bit of peace and quiet"³⁶ to focus on its domestic agenda. But based on its self-perception and assessment of the regional environment, this required region-wide acceptance of its role as the regional leader, and the containment — and, ultimately, reversal — of regional development it perceived as eventually converging in a threat to its national security. Saudi Arabia briefly considered a MB-run Egypt a potential challenger to its regional leadership in the early 2010s, and it saw Qatar's regional activism as undue overreach. Primarily, however, it felt that the regional order needed to constrain and, if necessary, exclude Turkey and, especially, Iran. According to a former senior British diplomat "[the Saudis] think that [the Iranians] should not be involved in the Arab world at all because they are Persians."³⁷ Saudi Arabia was not fundamentally opposed to all forms of cooperation with the non-Arab regional powers, but their engagement in Arab affairs had to be contingent on Riyadh's approval.

³⁵ Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), 731-753.

³⁶ Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud (Saudi Ambassador to the UK), interview with author, 11 December 2019.

³⁷ William Patey (former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview with author, 15 April 2019.

The UAE also thought that the regional order needed to reflect the MENA's "Arab-centric nature."³⁸ It saw the path towards stability in the assertion of Arab leadership in regional affairs vis-a-vis Iranian and, especially, Turkish attempts to influence the politics of Arab states and promote revolutionary political Islam. To this end, it sought the consolidation of a coalition — essentially a regional power concert³⁹ — consisting of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and itself. In this trilateral arrangement, it saw itself as "the most successful Arab state"⁴⁰ that could be "the leading light"⁴¹ by which other Arab states could orient their domestic political and socio-economic development trajectories. By cooperating closely with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, it hoped to harness clout as regional powers, while retaining some influence over the politics of the two Arab states whose internal stability it considered most crucial to wider regional stability. Furthermore, the UAE saw an opportunity in close collaboration with Israel. Bilaterally, it considered Israel as the region's single-most attractive economic and security partner in the MENA, and regionally, it saw a natural strategic alignment between its own priorities and Israel's opposition to Iran and (Turkish-backed) Islamist political projects in Arab countries. It concluded that the benefits of ties with Israel — which it saw as also including bi-partisan support from Washington — outweighed the risks of being seen as abandoning the Palestinian cause. Ultimately, the UAE also did not rule out bilateral engagement with Iran and Turkey, as long as Tehran and Ankara were willing to relinquish their ideologically-driven pursuits for influence over Arab politics in favour of economic cooperation. According to one analyst, the UAE wanted "a region where everybody thinks green — and I don't mean Islamist green, I mean Dollars."⁴²

Finally, Qatar's ideas about regional order were defined by its advocacy for the inclusion of Israel, Iran and Turkey, regardless of its leaders' frequent rhetorical

³⁸ UAE-based academic (A), phone interview with author, April 2019.

³⁹ This is familiar from the typologies of regional orders Lake and Morgan and Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll outlined in Chapter 3: David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997); Frazier and Stewart Ingersoll, "Political Powers and Security."

⁴⁰ Fulton, interview with author.

⁴¹ Neil Quilliam (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), interview with author, 26 February 2019.

⁴² Michael Stephens (Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), interview with author, 15 February 2019.

commitments to “our Arab nation”⁴³ and an “Arab national security”⁴⁴ that transcended state borders. In the context of the theoretical models of regional order outlined in Chapter 3, Qatar aspired to a collective security architecture in which states retained autonomy, but were committed to cooperation⁴⁵ (while, ideally, being guaranteed by an external and Qatar-friendly hegemon⁴⁶). Doha’s position in this regard was based on three interrelated assessments: First, it was convinced that stability required inclusiveness; inclusiveness at regional, international and state-levels. It saw this as the best way to preserve its own regional role, but also thought that every power that claimed to have a stake in regional affairs needed to be allowed to participate in political processes, lest they became spoilers. Second, as it sought to preserve its political independence, it saw a threat in any type of regional order that was dominated by a single power (i.e. Saudi Arabia or a Saudi-led concert) or two rival camps engaged in a zero-sum balance-of-power competition (Saudi Arabia against Iran). While it preferred a region in which there were no defined power centres, it saw the presence of both Turkey and Iran as counterweights to Saudi Arabia (and to each other) as the closest approximation to stability; a conviction strengthened by the 2017-2021 Gulf Crisis. Finally, Qatar regarded Turkey as the regional power whose views about the MENA, and specifically political developments in various Arab states (including acceptance of and support for the involvement of MB-aligned political actors), most closely aligned with its own. It therefore saw Turkey’s participation in the regional order not just in pragmatic terms, affording it protection from its neighbours, but also as strengthening its case for how politics in the region should change.

12. 3. 3. State-Level Order

At their core, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s conceptions of what constituted stability at the level of individual Arab states were similar: For all

⁴³ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Speech by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar,” (speech, 36th GCC Summit, Riyadh, 9 December 2015) available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/HH-Sheikh-Tamim-Bin-Hamad-Al-Thani-the-Emir-of-the-State-of-Qatar-Speech-at-the-Opening-Session-of-the-36th-GCC-Summit-.pdf> [accessed 14 February 2019].

⁴⁴ Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “The Inaugural Speech of His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Amir of Qatar on Becoming the Amir,” *Government Communications Office*, 26 June 2013, available at: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/speeches/>. [accessed 14 February 2019].

⁴⁵ This resembles the third stage of order outlined by Lake and Morgan: Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

⁴⁶ This is akin to Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll’s idea of a hegemonic order, but with the hegemon being external to the region itself; Frazier and Stewart Ingersoll, “Political Powers and Security.”

three, stability meant having in place governments that were capable of maintaining security within their borders (i.e. an absence of violence⁴⁷), that were unlikely to change dramatically in the short- to medium-term (i.e. government longevity⁴⁸), and that were favourably disposed towards them and their respective regional agenda. In fact, their assessment of a state's domestic stability (or at least their public portrayal thereof) often appeared dependent on their bilateral relationship with its government at the time. For example, according to Qatar's narrative, Egypt was more stable under President Morsi, Doha's ally, than under President Al-Sisi, who was hostile towards Qatar. Conversely, in Saudi Arabia and the UAE's views, Al-Sisi had stabilised after wresting power from Morsi and the MB. As the analysis of the preceding six chapters shows, however, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's understanding of state-level stability in the MENA went beyond the narrow prism of their bilateral relationships. Here, too, areas of overlap and divergence in their conception of stability were closely linked to their respective perceptions of developments in countries across the region throughout the 2010s.

12. 3. 3. 1. Domestic Security Frames Perceptions

The governments in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha were not prepared for the Arab Uprisings, their revolutionary fervour, or their transformative impact on regional affairs. Over the following years, they formed relatively similar views about what had led to the Uprisings; identifying a combination of political and socio-economic governance failures in most of the countries that had experienced mass protest movements (discussed in more detail below). Simultaneously, however, differences in their perceptions of the Uprisings' impact on regional stability and the merits of popular protests as a productive means of change became increasingly pronounced. While Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar all backed and opposed political change in different countries across the region, their initial attitudes towards the Uprisings appeared to correspond with their assessments about their domestic situations.

⁴⁷ Therefore meeting one of the basic indicators of stability identified by Dowding and Kimber and Hurwitz as outlined in Chapter 3. See: Keith M. Dowding and Richard Kimber, "The Meaning and Use of 'Political Stability'," *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983), 229-243; Leon Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability," *Comparative Politics* 5, no 3 (1973), 449-463.

⁴⁸ A second key indicator identified by Dowding and Kimber and Hurwitz, and elaborated on in more detail by: Brian Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (London: Collier-Macmillan 1970); D. Sanders, and V. M. Herman, "The Stability of Governments in Western Democracies," *Acta Politica* 12 (1977), 346-377.

The Qatari government, facing no domestic opposition, enthusiastically backed popular calls for change in many — though not all — Arab countries. The Emirati government cracked down on a small, but vocal opposition, while selectively expressing support or scepticism regarding protest movements across the region. The Saudi monarchy appeared most concerned with its domestic security — although public dissent remained limited — and most wary of developments across the region. As the decade progressed, this emerging divergence crystallised into a clear dichotomy: Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha still agreed that evolutionary reform processes led by benevolent governments were preferable to revolutionary change — after all, that was the path they all professed to be on themselves. Qatar, however, maintained its position that popularly-driven movements for change were legitimate, worthy of support, and the logical consequence of excessive repression. From its perspective, instability emerged where counter-revolutionary forces were at work, not from the protests. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, meanwhile, came to see the Uprisings as unmitigated disasters (Turki Al-Faisal dubbed them “the Arab troubles”⁴⁹), considering their revolutionary energy to have opened a “lethal Pandora’s box”⁵⁰ in the region.

12. 3. 3. 2. Different Conceptions of Change for Stability

As noted above, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar saw governments’ socio-economic failures as a key driver behind the Arab Uprisings. Their conceptions of stability therefore all emphasised the need for political leaders to provide for their population’s material needs and facilitate economic development. Yet, aside from general prescriptions for governments to curb corruption and create jobs and praise for their own leaders as models of wisdom and conscientiousness, they did not have detailed proposals (at least not publicly presented) for how other countries could overcome their socio-economic challenges. As in the past, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha showed their willingness to support fellow Arab governments with investments, loans or aid. But they were also reticent “to be seen as cash cows,”⁵¹ particularly as they grew increasingly concerned about the sustainability of their own economies in

⁴⁹ Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “The National Press Club: HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal,” (speech, The World Affairs Today, Washington DC, 24 February 2012), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJKmrn_Lbog [accessed 18 April 2019].

⁵⁰ Gargash, “Keynote Speech.”

⁵¹ Peter Millett (former British Ambassador to Jordan and Libya), phone interview with author, 25 November 2019.

light of low international oil and gas prices. The UAE was arguably most forthright in its conviction that other states (including Saudi Arabia) could follow the principles of its own socio-economic governance model. This included its emphasis on openness to international trade and technocratic management free of what it regarded as ideological impediments to socio-economic policy-making, especially in the form of religious sensitivities interfering with business interests (this was linked to its views about political Islam, discussed below).

Similarly, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's conception of stability were not strictly tied to a specific political system. They agreed that governments needed to have a degree of political legitimacy and popular support, and their public assessments that Arab monarchies had an inherent advantage in this regard. Being able to draw on historic roots, for example, was somewhat self-serving. Efforts by all three countries to boost their governments' domestic popularity with generous handouts (in the wake of the Arab Uprisings) and the promotion of nationalist narratives centred around their leaders' personalities.⁵² However, doing so also suggested that they saw the need to strengthen ties with their populations. Ultimately, beyond the preference to preserve Arab monarchies, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha understood legitimacy to derive from political leaders' conduct and ability to provide material benefits to the public, rather than from how they attained power in the first place. Nevertheless, there were significant differences in how the three saw the relationship between stability and the manner in which governments exercised their power. This was most apparent when comparing Qatar and the UAE, with Saudi Arabia mostly aligned with the latter.

Throughout the 2010s, Qatari leaders and officials repeatedly expressed support for the people of Egypt, Libya, Syria and Tunisia in their "struggle for freedom and democracy."⁵³ They also became increasingly vocal in declaring that various governments in the region, including some of their Gulf neighbours, lacked legitimacy due to excessive political repression. However, Qatar's

⁵² See for example: Eman Alhusein, "Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia," *ECFR Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019); Eleonora Ardemagni, "Gulf Monarchies' Militarised Nationalism," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 February 2019, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78472>. [accessed 12 October 2020].

⁵³ Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Attiah, "Syria and the Regional Impact: Khalid Al Attiyah" (speech, IISS Manama Dialogue, Manama, 7 December 2013), available at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2013-4e92/plenary-3-d35d/attiyah-7cd7> [accessed 12 February 2019].

insistence that stability required “democratic life”⁵⁴ was not necessarily about the establishment of democratic institutions and procedures, but instead inferred that governments needed to retain the broadest popular support possible. It believed that this required providing adequate public services and sufficient economic opportunity, but also a readiness by governments to adjust to, and be inclusive of different political and ideological viewpoints amongst their populations. As one Doha-based academic explained, Qatar’s idea of stability required governments that were “very populist in a way.”⁵⁵ Its notion of “democratic life” could therefore exist under almost any kind of political system (including an absolute monarchy like Qatar’s), so long as its political leaders enjoyed broad-based popularity. By contrast, the UAE saw democracy, especially in conjunction with populism, as potentially divisive and dangerous, particularly in societies in which Islamist or sectarian ideologies were prevalent. It did not equate democracy with instability per se, but (seemingly in line with the political science literature⁵⁶) regarded transitions toward democracy as inherently uncertain and destabilising — and therefore not advisable in the context of the region’s contemporary strategic environment. Abu Dhabi saw limits to the stability that could be provided by governments resorting to excessive political repression, at least in the absence of adequate socio-economic development. However, it also concluded that the Arab Uprisings had provided “a lesson of what happens if you loosen the grip and become complacent.”⁵⁷ In its view, the pre-2011 Egyptian or Tunisian governments had been insufficiently in control of the public sphere in their countries, leaving them unaware of, and giving too much space to, the activities of potential agitators. For the UAE, stability therefore required leaders and state apparatuses strong enough to “keep a lid on all this dangerous civil society activity”⁵⁸ that result in bottom-up demands for change.

⁵⁴ Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, “Special Address, HE Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabor Al-Thani” (speech, World Economic Forum 2011, Dead Sea, 23 October 2011), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD875jb1tiM> [accessed 12 February 2019].

⁵⁵ Steven Wright (Associate Professor, Hamad Bin Khalifa University), interview with author, 1 April 2018.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 3, and specifically cited works by: Lothar Brock et al., *Fragile States: War and Conflict in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Peter Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (London: Vintage Books, 2009); Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Roland Paris, *After War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Baker Institute Fellow, Rice University), phone interview with author, 1 April 2019.

⁵⁸ Krieg, interview with author.

12. 3. 3. 3. Incompatible Views of Political Islam

This difference in views between Qatar and the UAE — and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia — provided the basis for the most prominent divergence in the three countries' conceptions of stability in the MENA, namely if and how political Islam and stability could be reconciled.

The Qatari government had no “particular ideological objection to the Muslim Brotherhood’s school of thought or mainstream Islamism more generally.”⁵⁹ This was partially influenced by the lack of a domestic Islamist opposition in Qatar, and Doha’s hopes that it could convert long-standing personal relationships with Islamist dissidents, some of whom appeared in the ascendancy in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, into expanded regional influence. More conceptually, however, Qatar also saw political Islam as a natural and popular force in the region that should not be excluded from its politics. From its perspective, violent and extremist groups like AQ and Daesh found a foothold precisely in areas where governments repressed non-violent Islamist participation in public life. While this did not make Qatar an ideologically committed advocate of political Islam, it did demonstrate its belief that not only were Islamism and stability compatible, but that stability required governments to accommodate or coopt non-violent Islamist constituencies in order to prevent their radicalisation.

Qatar’s demonstrated beliefs were entirely incompatible with the views of the UAE. The leadership in Abu Dhabi, in particular, saw political Islam as antithetical to stability. It regarded the MB as “the root of all evil”⁶⁰ and as the foundation of AQ and Daesh had emerged from. Even where the MB was advocating non-violent change, the UAE understood its ideology as inherently transnational and therefore undermining the region’s state system, and as imposing a religious framework on all aspects of policy-making that made it a threat to the Emirates’ political and socio-economic development model. Consequently, the UAE considered the suppression — and, ideally, eradication — of Islamism as a political force as a necessary condition for stability. Rooting out its domestic Islamist opposition was not enough, political Islam had to be opposed across the region. A UAE-based analyst explained that Emirati leaders “strongly believe in the idea of a domino effect, so what happens in Libya and,

⁵⁹ Shadi Hamid (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution), interview with author, 30 May 2019.

⁶⁰ Quilliam, interview with author.

more importantly, in Egypt will have consequences all around.”⁶¹ Recognising the importance of religion in the politics and societies of countries across the region, however, the UAE promoted its notion of moderate Islam as an alternative to Islamism, to “fill that space with something else.”⁶² In practice, this meant advocating Islamic practice that was mostly confined to the private sphere, with all its public and societal aspects closely monitored and controlled by governments.

Saudi Arabia, finally, adopted a similar position, particularly since the rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman. He described the MB as part of the “triangle of evil”⁶³ in the region. Even before 2015, Saudi Arabia worried about the prospect of a religiously and electorally legitimised governance model becoming successfully established in the region. These concerns, however, were mostly limited to what Riyadh regarded as countries that could potentially challenge its regional leadership status, namely Egypt and Turkey. It therefore supported the overthrow of President Morsi in the former, and regarded Turkey’s President Erdogan as a geo-strategic and ideational rival using patronage of political Islam to expand his regional reach. Yet although Saudi Arabia designated the MB a terrorist organisation, it did not see political Islam as a major impediment to stability in Arab states it considered less relevant to regional order. In short, an Islamist government in Cairo was a problem, but one in Tunis was not. In fact, in some contexts, including in Yemen, Saudi Arabia continued to work with MB affiliates, making the pragmatic assessment of “which Muslim Brother is useful and which isn’t.”⁶⁴ Saudi Arabia also promoted its own notion of moderate Islam. Under Mohammed bin Salman, this included curbing the influence of its clerical establishment over the domestic policy agenda. However, building on the Kingdom’s governance model also entailed harnessing religious authority to delegitimise political activism.⁶⁵ From Riyadh’s perspective, stability therefore required that governments did not just have control over the religious sphere, but could also leverage religion as a source of political power.

⁶¹ UAE-based Academic (B), phone interview with author, 26 June 2019.

⁶² Courtney Freer (Research Fellow, LSE Middle East Centre), interview with author, 14 February 2019.

⁶³ Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” interview by Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/> [accessed 18 April 2019].

⁶⁴ German Middle East analyst, phone interview with author, 24 April 2019.

⁶⁵ Eman Alhussein, “Saudi Arabia Champions ‘Moderate Islam,’ Underpinning Reform Efforts,” *Issue Paper* 10 (Washington DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2020).

12. 4. Conclusion

Throughout the 2010s, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar proclaimed their commitment to (re)building stability in the MENA. However, as this thesis shows, the shared objective of stability did not translate into unity of purpose amongst the three Gulf monarchies. On the contrary, stability meant very different things from their respective vantage points. The thesis' theoretical framework suggests that states tend to define stability as the outcome of a particular system of order in their strategic environment that they regard as favourable to them and their interests. At a minimum, this includes the absence of major threats to their national security, and ideally extends to the presence of conditions that allow them to pursue their strategic interests. Moreover, the framework proposes that the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous nature of the strategic environment means that states can plausibly (likely, even) have different perceptions of developments taking place around them. The conclusions from the three case studies in this thesis, summarised and compared in this chapter, show how the similarities and differences in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of the MENA during the 2010s resulted in three distinct conceptions of stability in the region that overlapped in some areas, but substantially diverged in others.

Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha concurred that the MENA descended into unprecedented disorder and instability in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, with deleterious consequences for their national security and regional interests. But their perceptions of the precise dynamics behind this collapse and how these related to how they saw themselves and their roles in the region differed in many regards. For example, while Saudi Arabia saw Iran's regional behaviour as the main driver of instability, the UAE identified political Islam in its various guises as the greatest threat to regional stability and Qatar saw the main problem in zero-sum regional power politics fueled by what it considered the region's counter-revolutionary forces (including its neighbours). Moreover, while Saudi Arabia considered itself the MENA's natural leader that could not tolerate other regional powers dominating regional affairs, the UAE and Qatar considered themselves and their respective domestic political and socio-economic development models both at risk from, and as potential (competing) role models for, political change in the region.

These perceptions then shaped the three countries' conceptions of stability in the MENA — essentially their views of the systems of order (structures, dynamics, norms etc.) that needed to be in place at the state, regional and international levels to allow them to feel safe and able to pursue their regional interests. These conceptions most closely overlapped in how they saw the roles external powers could or had to play in the interest of stability. All three wanted US engagement in the region to become more active and predictable than they had perceived it to be during the 2010s. With some variation, they also all conceded that in a shifting global environment, Washington could no longer be relied upon as the region's external hegemon and that stability in the region would require working with, and securing the support of, other external powers; most notably Russia and China. Ultimately, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha wanted external powers to help preserve the region's state system and sovereignty norms and to accept a stake in its countries' economic development. This, however, was where most of the similarities ended. There remained a lot of alignment between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on regional and state-level matters (not least vis-à-vis Qatar), but their views were far from homogenous.

For Saudi Arabia, stability in the MENA meant a regional order in which its leadership position was not contested and no other regional power — least of all Iran — could hold more sway over the affairs in or between Arab states than it had itself. It essentially wanted to be a passive hegemon that did not have to dictate the behaviour of other governments, but could instead rely on them not to become beholden to Iranian or Turkish/Islamist agendas that could undermine the Kingdom's security and interests. The UAE, meanwhile, saw stability in the creation and preservation of state-level and regional structures that could contain and ultimately root out any popularly-driven, revolutionary or (and of most importance) Islamist movements. It further regarded its own political and socio-economic governance model (defined by strong, technocratic and economically-oriented leadership) as a model others could emulate to attain stability; not least its neighbour Saudi Arabia. For Qatar, stability revolved around the principle of inclusiveness. At the state-level, it argued that governments needed to try to accommodate all but the most irreconcilable actors (including Islamists) in consultative processes. Regionally, it saw stability — and its own security— only in a system of order in which power was

sufficiently distributed that no one or two major countries could dictate the affairs of smaller neighbours. This Qatari insistence on inclusiveness was fundamentally at odds with conceptions held by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's more assertive and exclusionary approaches to regional politics represented profound instability for Doha. Finally, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia considered each other as mostly likeminded and useful partners throughout the decade, it was also clear that the former would Saudi dominated region as stable if this were to reduce its freedom of manoeuvre, and the latter would not countenance the notion of Emirati activism it could not live with.

Ultimately, this chapter — and the analysis throughout this thesis — demonstrates that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's concurrent declared objectives of stability in the MENA carried within them more differences and contradictions than commonalities. For all of them, stability required substantial change in the region's systems of order rather than a mere return to some specific status quo. However, their ideas for what this change and the resulting order should look like diverged from and, at times, violently clashed with one another.

13. Conclusion

Towards a Meaningful Conversation about Stability

Stability in the MENA cannot be seen as an objective that unites the various regional and external powers seeking to influence developments in the region. It does not serve as a lowest common denominator for adversaries and competitors. Even amongst allies and partners, it is likely to — at best — serve as a rhetorical device without much substance, or — at worst — obscure potentially irreconcilable differences. The notion that the term stability means different things to different people is the initial assumption this thesis emerges from, and it is affirmed by answers to the thesis' research questions. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's perceptions of the regional strategic environment during the 2010s were different, converging only on the basic assessment that the region descended into disorder and instability. They also — and consequently — had very different conceptions of stability in the MENA; they overlapped in some areas, but diverged and even collided in many others.

This chapter does not repeat the findings and conclusions produced by the analysis of the three case studies in this thesis — these are outlined in detail in the previous chapter. Instead, it briefly reviews the thesis' overall contribution to the three areas of debate outlined in its introduction.

Firstly, the thesis contributes to the literature dealing with the MENA's contemporary international relations and, specifically, the study of the foreign policies of three of the most important regional powers: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. The decade following the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings has spurred significant development in this field. Scholars from the region and around the world have produced many valuable publications and insights, many of which this thesis draws and builds on. Throughout, the involvement of external powers in the MENA — the Obama administration's handling of the Arab Uprisings, for example, or Russia's intervention in Syria — has remained a very important dimension of regional affairs. However, just as Kerr urged his readers to see the political competition between Arab states in the 1950s and 60s as more than “a projection of decisions made in Washington, London, Moscow,”¹ the events and

¹ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), vi.

developments in the MENA during the 2010s can only be understood by also taking into account the behaviour and outlook of regional powers — in Kerr’s words, their “own conception of their world and their visions of its future.”² By offering a systematic and comparative analysis of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar’s respective perceptions of instability, and conceptions of stability in the region, the thesis contributes three important perspectives in this regard. It demonstrates that for all their socio-economic, political, cultural and historical similarities (arguably especially between the UAE and Qatar), the three Gulf states had different views of the region surrounding them. They came to different conclusions about the causes and drivers of instability in the MENA; they interpreted their roles in the region differently; and, consequently, they formed and pursued very different ideas of what a better future for the region looked like. The 2017-2021 Gulf Crisis was the most apparent manifestation of these differences to date, but understanding them is also important in making sense of other regional issues, past, present and future — from the post-2011 conflicts in Libya or Yemen, to the prospects of a future regional security framework involving Israel, Iran and Turkey. Further study, not just of the three states under examination in this thesis, but also of the perspectives of other actors shaping regional affairs, including perhaps non-state actors, would add to an even more nuanced picture.

Secondly, the thesis proposes a framework for making sense of the notion of stability in the MENA that is so often invoked as an objective of foreign policy by states in the region and beyond. It demonstrates that concurrent, and even joint declarations of a commitment to (re)building stability cannot be taken as reliable indicators of a common purpose. In fact, it suggests that the objective of stability can serve as a fruitful lens through which to explore the differences in various perspectives on regional affairs. In the absence of a clear definition of stability, the thesis offers its own, tailored to the specific context of foreign policy. It understands foreign policy as something states engage in an attempt to alter the inherently complex and dynamic strategic environment they find themselves to their advantage. In this context, they see stability as a condition, a system of order in this environment that they regard as favourable to them and their interests. To an extent, the framework therefore proposes that states’

² Ibid.

conceptions of stability are, in the first instance, based on self-interest and unique to them. However, as the three case studies show, states also have a tendency to see their own conception of stability as universally applicable. They each believe that what they regard as an order conducive to stability would also be recognised as such by anyone else truly committed to stability; and they are often only partially aware of the extent to which their ideas of stability can appear as deeply destabilising to others. Yet, in some areas, examining states' conceptions of stability also reveals moments of alignment — some obvious (e.g. that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar all see active US engagement in the region as contributing to stability), others perhaps more surprising (e.g. that both the UAE and Qatar regard constraining Saudi Arabia as a key function of the regional order they want to see). In sum, the thesis' analytical framework, although it could undoubtedly be further refined and include additional components, can be an effective tool to structure analyses of other players active in the MENA (as suggested at the end of the previous paragraph) and facilitate systematic comparisons between them.

Finally, the thesis' arguments and conclusions are relevant to ongoing public debates in various European capitals and elsewhere about how best to engage with and in the MENA going forward. As outlined in the thesis' introduction, developments in the region remain important for policy-makers in Berlin, London, Paris or Washington, including for economic, security and geo-strategic reasons. There appears to be a general consensus amongst governments in Europe and North America, that unilateral interventions in the region, and attempts impose crisis resolutions or reform initiatives from the outside are — and should be — a thing of the past. Instead, the focus is on working with local partners and particularly with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, with whom there are often long-standing bilateral defence relationships and expanding economic ties, and who possess the financial, military and diplomatic capabilities and political motivation to shape regional affairs. However, to be effective and avoid working at cross-purposes, such cooperation has to be based on a thorough understanding of these countries' unique perspectives on the region. This thesis is not a policy paper — further analysis and specific recommendations for European states' foreign policies towards the MENA may be the subject of subsequent publications. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that merely insisting on a shared commitment to, or interest in, stability is not

enough. Instead, it is important that governments first establish an awareness of what their partners of choice understand stability to mean, and how that relates to their own ideas. Sand's words from 1957 remain relevant: "unless we have in mind the same general order of things as the peoples of the Middle East have in mind when we say 'stability,' we can not very well hold a meaningful conversation with them on these matters."³ This thesis offers a contribution for such a meaningful dialogue.

³ William Sands, "Requirements for Middle Eastern Political Stability," *Social Science* 32, no. 4 (1957), 201.

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