

دراسة نظرية مقارنة لديناميات البنية الأمنية في النظام الإقليمي الخليجي بعد الربيع العربي

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ملخص:

هدف الدراسة: تسعى الدراسة إلى فهم ديناميكيات العلاقات الخليجية الخليجية في فترة ما بعد الربيع العربي من منظور نظري مقارنة. **المنهجية:** اعتمدت هذه الدراسة على منهجية مقارنة، حيث تتعامل بشكل نقدي مع النظريات السائدة في مجال العلاقات الدولية، وتحديدًا الواقعية الجديدة، والمؤسسية الليبرالية الجديدة، والمدرسة الإنجليزية فيما يتعلق بسلوك الدول الصغرى ومنطقة الخليج العربي. أفترض، تجادل الدراسة بأن هذا المنهج المقارن يمكن أن يساهم في توضيح وفهم الديناميكيات والتحوليات الإقليمية (والدولية) التي حدثت في منطقة الخليج العربي في العقد الماضي، بعيداً عن الكتابات السياسية المشحونة والمتحيزة بشدة، والتي شكلت المعرفة عن المنطقة. **النتائج:** تُظهر النتائج أنه مقارنة بالمؤسسية الليبرالية الجديدة والمدرسة الإنجليزية في العلاقات الدولية، فإن الواقعية الجديدة تمثل البديل النظري الأكثر شمولاً القادر على شرح وتوضيح الديناميكيات المعقدة لبنى الأمنية والاستراتيجية والسياسية في دول الخليج العربي، والعلاقات الدولية لدول الخليج بشكل عام. **الخلاصة:** نظراً للسمات الهيكلية للنظام "الأمني" الخليجي، واعتبارات توازن القوى الإقليمي، والمخاوف الأمنية المثقلة للمنطقة، فإن النهج الواقعي الجديد يعتبر الأنسب لفهم ديناميكيات العلاقات الخليجية الخليجية في مرحلة ما بعد ثورات الربيع العربي.

المصطلحات الأساسية: الخليج العربي، نظريات العلاقات الدولية، المعضلة الأمنية، توازن القوى، الواقعية الجديدة، المدرسة الإنجليزية، الدول الصغرى.

A Comparative Theoretical Study of the Dynamics of Security Architecture in the Gulf Regional System since the Arab Uprisings (2011-2021)

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Abstract

Objective: The study seeks to understand the dynamics of Gulf relations in the post-Arab Spring period from a comparative theoretical perspective. **Methods:** the study is built upon a comparative approach, where I am critically engaged with the mainstream theories in the field of International Relations (IR) namely neo-realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and the English school regarding the behaviour of small states and the Arab Gulf region. Hypothetically, such a comparative approach could help us articulate and understand the regional (and international) dynamics and transformations that took place in the Arabian Gulf region in the last decade, away from the deeply political, charged, and biased writings that construct and produce the knowledge about the region. **Results:** The results show that compared to neoliberal institutionalism and the English school in IR, neorealism represents the most comprehensive theoretical alternative capable of articulating the complex dynamics of the security, strategic and political architectures of the Arab Gulf, and international relations of the Gulf countries. **Conclusion:** Due to structural features of the Gulf “security” system, the regional balance of power, and heavily loaded security considerations of the region, the neorealist approach is the most appropriate for understanding the dynamics of Gulf-Gulf relations in the post-revolution stage.

Keywords: Arabian Gulf, IR Theories, Security Dilemma, Balance of Power, Neorealism, The English School, Small States.

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Introduction

How can the current crisis in the Arab Gulf region be understood? What are the most appropriate theoretical approaches that could facilitate the process of understanding (and eventually explain) the intensity of raging rivalries and disputes between some members of a GCC organization, which was widely considered the only successful regional example in the Arab region for decades. This study argues that structural realism (neorealism) represents a suitable choice for several reasons, such as focusing on rivalries and struggles between nation-states for power and domination and the primacy of security considerations as the main driver of states' external behaviour in the anarchic international system in addition to the concentration on maximising power, prestige, and sphere of external influence as the main method to achieve national interests. In brief, this study claims that nation-states emphasize the imperative of 'absolute gains' more than the drive to achieve 'relative gains' as the neoliberal institutionalists and constructivists claim. According to this proposition, nation-states are more concerned about what they primarily acquire and obsess more than what other states get or have.

To understand the dynamics and future trends of the military, strategic, and foreign relations among these countries, this paper adopts the lens of structural realism to investigate how small and rich states such as the GCC countries interact (Waltz, 1979; Donnelly, 2000). Likewise, it seeks to illuminate why structural realism is more relevant than other theoretical approaches such as neoliberal institutionalism or constructivism and the English School's Regional Security Complex theory. The realistic approach is adopted in this study as a theoretical lens to articulate the future relations between the member states of the GCC organization, and to explore the effectiveness and the ability of regional organizations in managing the regional crises in the Arab region, and the predominance of economic considerations (relative gains) over security considerations, security competitions, and absolute gains accounts. Finally, the study challenges the claims of the RSCs theory and its ability to settle regional disputes.

This study is divided into three parts; the first part outlines how International Relations (IR) theories view the Arab Gulf region, and the general perceptions about this region. The second part critically discusses the mainstream theories in the field of International Relations (IR) namely

neo-realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and the English school regarding the behaviour of small states and the Arab Gulf region. The third part explains the main claims that led to argue that neorealism (despite its deficiencies) represents the most comprehensive theoretical alternative capable of explaining and articulating the dynamics of the Gulf-Gulf relations, and international relations of the Gulf countries in general. In conclusion, the paper represents the findings regarding the theoretical debate about the future of security, stability, and bilateral and foreign relations for the Arab Gulf states.

The Gulf Regional System (GRS): An Overview

To understand Gulf countries relations toward each other and other actors in the international society, it is crucial to be comprehensively cognizant of the regional and inter-relations contexts of these states, known as Gulf Regional System (GRS). According to Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, the GRS is the geographical area that includes “all the gulf contiguous and coastal countries which are considered, because of their interactions, linkages, and conflicts, a distinct regional unit” (Abdulla, 1998, 15). This sub-regional system is distinct from the Arab Regional System. Also, GRS is not GCC: the GCC includes all member states of the GRS except Iraq and Iran, and was mainly established to deter and contain these two larger regional powers (ibid). Certainly, the international relations of these countries cannot and should not be studied and explained away from Iraq, Iran and even Yemen. These ‘outcast’ neighbours are still an indispensable part of the context that determined and formed the GCC internal-external behaviour.

According to structural realism, the GCC countries are just rich, small and vulnerable states, surrounded by hostile larger powers, living in a permanent state of tension and instability due to deep imbalance of regional powers. Since the British ‘East of Suez’ withdrawal of 1968, these countries have continued to bandwagon with great powers that assure their security, survival, and the perseverance of ruling tribal regimes. In return, the newly born gulf countries pledged to grant these friendly great powers (the protectors) some privileges and preferential treatment, such as reasonable oil prices and military presence on their territories (Gause, 2010; Almezaini & Rickli, 2017). In summary, due to the lack of capabilities to deter powerful-aggressive neighbours, the G.C.C. small states and sheikhdoms have become ‘pawns’ and ‘subordinates’ in the hands of great

powers that offer them defence umbrella and ensure their security.

Some might claim that this perspective is over-simplified and diminishes the role and the importance of these countries outside the realm of oil and their relations with great powers. Most Middle East experts agree that from a political-strategic perspective in economic terms the Gulf regional order is an ‘American Gulf’ and ‘Gulf of Oil’ or ‘World’s oil-artery’. Emirati political scientist Abdulkhaleq Abdullah correctly argues that ‘outside these two factors, there is no significant contribution to the Arabian Gulf countries’ (Abdullah, 1998, 15-19; Al-Rumaihi, 2001, 1996; Naqīb, 1990). However, this factor does not diminish the importance of the GCC countries in the international arena. On the contrary, due to the largest oil reserves and their geopolitical significance, the GCC countries practice unparalleled influence over the global economic system that has existed since the end of the Second World War (Ulrichsen, 2016).

For example, according to many studies, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the pivotal states in the Arab World, as well as the cornerstone of the international economic system (Miller, 2016; Kechichian, 1999). The proponents of this view suggest that given its enormous oil reserves and production capacity, any tension or instability within the kingdom (world’s oil bank) would trigger a new global ‘great depression’ like the one that hit the world in the 1930s or even worse (Pollack, 2003, 3-4). The influential position of Saudi Arabia makes some experts believe that it has the same power as the US, the founder of the world economic system, if not a bigger one.

IR Theories and the Study of Small States

This section revolves around the theoretical discussion between neorealism, neoliberal institutionalists and the English School on great powers, small states, and the dynamics of promoting peace and stability among states on the one hand, and how to understand the current crisis in the Gulf region through these theoretical lenses, on the other.

Neorealism

According to Realism (classical, structural and neoclassical alike) each nation-state strives to achieve security and survival, but how can this be attained? The answer mainly depends on decision-makers’ perceptions, and how they understand the balance of power status, evaluate their

national capabilities with other powers in the system, and above all how they perceive the nature of the international structure (Singer, 1960: 461; Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009; Zakaria 1992; Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, 2009, 2016). Any theory, according to Waltz and others, tries to provide ‘explanations’ not ‘expectations’ for a certain phenomenon, and if it says ‘whether’ something will happen, it will not, and should not, say ‘when’ or ‘how’ it will happen (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013, 434-35; Mearsheimer, 2009, 242-243). Accordingly, in international politics, states coexist in an international anarchic system (with no higher authorities above states) dominated by uncertainty and competition, ruled by self-help mechanisms, and dependant only on their capabilities and sources of power (primarily military and economic) to ensure their security. Because of the imbalance of power and capabilities between small states and other larger, stronger, and more aggressive neighbours, these small states, like most of the G.C.C. countries, tend to follow strategies, such as Balancing, Bandwagoning, Appeasement, and Neutrality, as well as other strategies in order to confront the external threats imposed on them by other powers (Walt, 1987, 21-22)(*). For neorealists like Mearsheimer, if you are not a predator in an anarchic system, you will be a prey (Mearsheimer, 2013, 74).

(*) Kenneth Waltz defined balancing behaviour as “joining with the weaker side in an effort to prevent hegemonic bids”, while he defined the behaviour of bandwagoning as joining the stronger coalition”. (Waltz, 1979, 126). Likewise, Stephen Van Evera defined balancing as “aligning against the greatest threat to a state’s independence”, and defined bandwagoning as “to give in to threats.” (Van Evera, 1990/1991, 20). As for the definition of appeasement, Paul Kennedy defined it as “the policy of settling international (or, for that matter, domestic) quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise, thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly very dangerous.” (Kennedy, 1976: 195), while Daniel Treisman defined it as “the policy of making unilateral concessions to a challenger or potential challenger in the hope of avoiding or delaying conflict—does not require any rational negotiation or compromise; on the contrary, the concessions envisioned are unilateral.” (Treisman, 2004, 347). Finally, Neutrality means “impartiality or non-belligerency” or as defined by Pertti Joenniemi “a policy designed to restrict and regulate the use of force in international relations; it creates political space for states wishing to differentiate themselves as neutrals in a power political arena, while maintaining their connection with states willing to engage in war.” (Joenniemi, 2004, 289).

Regarding small states (like most of the G.C.C. countries), realists believe that the main criterion that determines small states' external behaviour is governed by the threats to their security and survival (or by whether they are vulnerable!). Given the fact that the international system does not discourage aggressive behaviour, and in case of they lacked the capabilities to ensure their security and sovereignty, small states can be driven to concentrate on pursuing, maintaining, and adopting realistic strategies to protect their core values and maintain their position in the balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2009, 243–244). In international politics, it is survival that is the most important value for all states, not cooperation or potential profits (Glaser, 2003; Powell, 1991).

Throughout history, small and mainly weak states rich in natural sources with economic benefits (such as oil, gas and diamonds) suffered more, as they are more vulnerable, more easily disturbed, and more prone to attacks and/or seizures by larger powers. This observation was recently confirmed by many studies that illuminated the correlation between natural resources in the third world countries and instability and conflicts (Ross, 2008, 2004). For instance, Michael Ross found that 'natural resources play a key role in triggering, prolonging, and financing conflicts', and there is a strong correlation between occurring natural resources and the renewal of conflict and civil wars (Ross, 2003; Penrose, 1976). Perceptively, Ross noted that while the number of conflicts in the world has dropped down since the end of the cold war, the number of oil-producer-based conflicts is likely to grow in the future, not only because 'oil impedes democracy', but also because it finances rebellions and wars (Based & Lay, 2009). After all, oil and other natural resources, despite their revenues and gains, turn out to be a curse, especially when associated with autocracy.

These states seek to maximize their oil utilization by using the great powers' needs and dependency on oil to supply arms, rely upon their defensive umbrella to protect the autocratic pro-western regimes, and to protect their sovereignty that might be threaten by revisionist neighbours (Layne, 2009). Clearly, the less democratic the state is, the more likely it is to adopt realistic policies. This means that these states prefer to establish a bilateral relation with great powers to ensure their security and survival, instead of building multilateral relations with other great powers, even if the benefits of multilateral relations would overcome the gains of bilateral relations with the pacifier (Hook & Niblock, 2015; Fürtig, 2007; Al Shayji,

2014). For small states, security and defence considerations undoubtedly are a matter of life or death.

In the last few decades, Gulf regional order witnessed more than three wars, where the average of warfare in the gulf was one war per decade (1980, 1990, & 2003). Consequently, these conditions pushed small and rich GCC countries to seek long-term security commitments and ensure a defence umbrella by friendly great powers. This could explain the deep relations and Bandwagoning of third world countries with the U.S. in the post-cold war order, despite the US' intervention and exploitation of independence and sovereignty of these countries (Cordesman, 2004; Ramazani, 1988). Small G.C.C. states realised that in the case of an outbreak of a conflict between them and their larger neighbours (or even internal civil wars), the E.U., with its current institutional structure driven by principles rather than interests, does not have the capabilities or the will to intervene and protect the G.C.C. states' sovereignty and security. On the contrary, the U.S. policy in the Middle East region is driven by interests rather than principles and relies on bilateral alliances rather than international institutions. Based on its international and regional experience, the G.C.C. countries believe that the most important goal is to ensure their survival, not to realise gains, as liberal theorists argue.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

In contrast to neorealism, Neoliberal institutionalism (NLI) and constructivism stress on that international and regional institutions work to curb competitions and disputes and prevent escalation; they also support the claims about the abilities of institutional bodies on hindering and (strategically) restraining national governments, and forcing them to abandon confrontational and coercive (violent) methods of managing their crises and disputes within the organization's boundaries, through its mediation and arbitration mechanisms; i.e., third-party intervention, settlement, negotiation. Moreover, NLI indicates that nation-states are more inclined to adopt and apply collective action mechanisms and collective security arrangements (such as military institutions and security communities) to achieve their 'absolute gains' and national interests; e.g., cooperation, trade exchange, and mutual public goods (Kupchan & Kupchan, 1995).

Since the end of the cold war, the bulk of the debate between neo-

realists and neoliberal institutionalism has revolved around how significant security and military ties are in identifying, developing, and directing the behaviour of units in the international system (i.e., nation-states)! However, opponents of realism argue that power relations dynamics is the dominant factor in determining the nature of relations among nation-states and their relations with the rest of actors in international system (non-state actors). NLI, however, claims that institutions, economic interdependence, and social cohesion reinforce these institutions, where the flow of capital and products resulting from the globalization process creates new methods and modes of interactions among the actors in the system (state and non-state actors together). International institutional bodies significantly shifted the modes of interaction by customs deregulation, regulating and legitimizing international norms and interactions through empowering complex interdependence, open markets, deregulation and the customs border, etc (Russett & Oneal, 2001). Leading international institutions, such as the UN, IMF, EU, GATT, and others, encouraged national governments to adopt cooperative and collective strategies and policies, and abandon other hostile, aggressive and selfish policies and strategies such as balance of power and arms race, etc, which are perceived to be the main reasons of conflicts. Indeed, neoliberalism is trying to minimize the scope of conflict by enhancing collective actions among nations. The main tool to achieve that is by expanding and reinforcing international organizations.

NLI perceived international institutions to be a tool for international cooperation in which states are able to achieve peace, cooperation and prevent the outbreak of wars for many reasons. First of all, NLI claims that by alerting the behaviour of their members towards other aggressive and revisionist states, international organizations urge national governments to abandon the logic of anarchy manifested by conflict, competition, power struggle and maximization of narrow national interests, in favour of cooperative collective actions within the framework of international institutions aimed to achieve common goods (Keohane, 1988; Keohane & Martin, 1995).

Secondly, the proponents of NLI believe that cooperation and interdependence between states would reduce the likelihood of wars and conflicts for several aims: 1) Achieving common and mutual interests and gains through cooperation. 2) Enhancing the bulk of understanding and disarmament, along with reducing the feelings of mistrust and

mutual suspicion through increased trade exchange, communication, and interdependence. 3) Urging states on consent to partly waive and abandon their sovereign rights and authority in favour of international institutions for the sake of, optimistically, achieving peace and stability. Accordingly, the NLI believes that international institutions will become active trans-nationalities actors (above nation-states), and more influential than sovereign individual nation-state on international politics (Ruggie, 1992).

The third pillar of NLI's claim of peace, stability, and prosperity that international organizations could achieve is free trade and interdependence. For NLI, free trade and the elimination of customs barriers lead to boosting the rates of convergence and reducing rivalries and economic disputes between nation-states based on mutual interests and expected benefits to be gained by every state from cooperation (absolute gains), which will also lead to reinforcing economic performance that will raise the level of economic prosperity for both sides and defuse economic disputes and trade wars between them (Mansfield & Pollins, 2001, 836). Such win-win strategies, where the members of certain organizations are profoundly motivated and determined to achieve mutual interests and absolute gains for everyone, serve as inhibitors of disputes and belligerence, in which interdependence would affect the resilience of security and stability.

Consistent with the NLI arguments, the neorealism also believes that the main mechanism to achieve peace and stability in the international system is by enhancing the inclination to cooperation and interdependence among nations. Both schools do not diverge on the significance and necessity of cooperation and interdependence among nations, or on the crucial role of international institutions in achieving peace or stability. On the contrary, neorealists believe that international institutions and collective security arrangements and coalitions (alliance) are essential in achieving peace and stability (Glaser, 1994/1995; Ikenberry, 2001). However, the two biggest research programmes in the field of International Relations deviate and disagree on "how" to achieve peace and stability.

The dispute between the two schools is not over the 'ends' but rather over the 'means' of achieving peace and stability. They have different perceptions and evaluations of how influential and critical the role played by international institutions and organizations is in alerting and enforcing the behaviour and actions of nation-states in the international realm. Because of its state-centric propositions, neorealism believes that international

institutions, regardless of their strength and cohesion, cannot exceed their limits and authorities and act independently without the permissions of sovereign nation-states, which is believed to be the highest authority in the international system, and acts away the authority of nation-states. In other words, while NLI argues that international organisations can act independently, neorealists denies such claims and argue that in the final analysis international institutions are simply a tool or a pawn in the hands of dominant states (Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 2000). Whatever the pace of economic interdependence or cultural convergence and assimilation among a group of nation-states within a certain institutional framework, the neorealists indicate, peace and stability will only be accomplished and sustained if these factors and characteristics do not contradict or diverge with balance of power considerations, the distribution of power and security arrangements. If the role of international organizations contradicts these calculations, the upper hand will be for the security considerations where the egoistic, hostile and contradictory national-interest considerations will prevail, and the inclinations to cooperation and clustering will retreat.

The predominance of security and military considerations over economic or cultural considerations is what prevents international institutions from maintaining peace and stability. Even with admitting that NLI was right in arguing that since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the patterns of economic relations and trade exchange (interdependence) had been the overwhelming patterns of interactions among most of the nation-states, that, nevertheless, did not prevent the occurrence of conflicts and wars between these powers and states. In brief, the historical record shows that in the end what matters is the distribution of military capabilities not the level of economic integration or cultural assimilation (Gilpin, 1987, 140-150; Walt, 1987, 13-19). According to neorealism, the most significant role that ideational/non-material variables (i.e., economic and cultural integration) can play in international and regional dynamics is relatively hindered or delayed by the outcome of conflict and disputes, but this cannot diminish the disputes that emerge as a result of threatening national security, clash of interests, competition, and struggle for power and domination. This is not only the case in regions, such as the Arab World or the Arabian Gulf region but also in democratic regions such as the EU and elsewhere. International institutions are the mirror that reflects the distribution of power in a certain region. When the stability, security, survival, and national interests of

any country are at stake, national governments and leadership are only more concerned with the distribution of military capabilities, not with the rate of trade-exchange, that is what drives states to act in such irrational, and egoistic manner in which they become more concerned about the consequences of military and strategic imbalance more than calculating the potential gains of cooperation (Hirschman, 1977; Grieco, Powell & Snidal, 1993).

The English School

The proponents of constructivism school (and the English school in particular) argue that the changes that have taken place in the international system since the end of the Second World War, especially the rise and expansion of the so-called ‘international society’ and ‘international community’, are based on a set of shared-features among a certain group/s of nation-states that belong to a particular region (i.e., values, norms, and institutions); these states prevailed in constructing what is called a “Regional Security Complex” which refers to the interaction of regional actors in the context of integrated security threats of each state and their engagement in the security complex as a whole’ (Shayan, 2017, 23). Others defined it as ‘a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, de-securitisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another.’ (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, 491).

In contrast to the unilateral view of neorealism, the English school indicates that instead of the conflict-based interactions between distinct actors in the international anarchic system (mainly the nation-states), the Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory suggested the presence of three types of regional and international interaction—conflict formation, security community and security regimes (Shayan, 2017, 26-29). According to Buzan and Wæver, these three types are: A conflict formation which refers to “a pattern of security interdependence shaped by fear of war and expectation of use of violence.” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, 491). The second type is a more optimistic perspective of regional interactions, which anticipates that while the use of state-sponsored force might be expected, states are restrained from violence by rules. Indeed, a security community represents “a pattern of security interdependence in which states do not expect political relations to be accompanied by violence.” (op, cit: 489). Finally, the third suggested type is the security regimes which usually refer

to “a pattern of security interdependence still shaped by fears of war and expectations of the use of violence in political relations. As those fears and expectations are restrained by an agreed set of rules of conduct, there are expectations that those rules will be observed.” (op, cit, 491–492).

Instead of relying on the struggle for power and domination, the Balance of Power, and security and military competition, RSC claims that ‘the durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence’ are affected by ‘historical factors such as longstanding enmities, or the common cultural embrace of a civilisational area (op, cit, 45). According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), the neorealist perspective is insignificant and reductionist to understand the complicity of regional interactions in the modern international system.

“It is not enough to look at the distribution of power in order to predict the patterns of conflict. Historical hatreds and friendships, as well as specific issues that trigger conflict or cooperation, take part in the formation of an overall constellation of fears, threats, and friendships that define an RSC. These patterns of amity and enmity are influenced by various background factors such as history, culture, religion, and geography, but to a large extent they are path-dependent and thus become their own best explanation.” (op, cit, 50)

In the case of the Arabian Gulf region for instance, Jianwei Han and Hassan Hakimian (2019) claimed that this region has been a typical security sub-complex since the 1970s.

“.... since the British withdrawal in 1971 leading to the independence of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, the states in the Persian Gulf region formed an independent sub-complex due to the high degree of security interdependence: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq are the three pillars of the Persian Gulf. However, Iraq has been too weak to act as a pillar especially since the invasion in 2003.” (Han & Hakimian, 2019, 394)

However, according to the late Fred Halliday, the only partial, success story was that of the six Gulf monarchies which formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. Formal institutions, such as the Arab League (1945) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) (1969), that are supposed to embody and aggregate the aspirations and interests of the Arab and Islamic world, were and still are ineffectual

bodies, and no more than talking shops and pretexts for the occasional grandiose conferences: neither the Arab League nor the OIC are influential bodies (Haliday, 2009, 7; Beck, 2015; Pinfari, 2016). The reason behind this success was the overwhelming of realist perspectives that put security and military considerations in the first place, and not the NLI or the English school views that insist on the central role of the state and a robust scepticism about claims for the reality, or desirability, of a reduced state role. According to Holiday:

“... these oil-producing and conservative states are held together by the fear of their two unstable and larger neighbours, Iran and Iraq, and maintain formal and, in internal security matters, real collaboration. But on other matters, such as a common currency, or a shared military force, they have continued to diverge.” (Haliday, 2009, 7).

Why neorealism? Or A Structural Perspective of the Gulf Regional System

In contrast to most of the studies that rely on RSC to understand the regional security architecture and dynamics, or regional arrangements, this study is not interested in exploring or questioning the way the region is transforming itself on various fronts, or exploring how regional security regimes overcome the ongoing multiple security challenges on multidimensional aspects, or even exploring the feasibility of the establishment of a comprehensive security regime in the Gulf Region which can address all three levels of insecurity (i.e., regional, state and individual) thereby transcending the state-centric approach to security and creating security based on multi-sum principles and not on zero-sum calculations as discussed by other studies (Kumar, 2019, 481-482). Moreover, this study is not focused on the way by which the perception of primacy for regional predominance has been constructed or how the discourse of such attempts has been manifested and institutionalised (either through politicization or securitisation process), which makes the crisis between the four states thorny and uneasy to resolve; instead, this study is more interested in understanding the causes of the current crisis, rather than the possibilities of creating a security framework or arrangement in the Arabian Gulf region, or between the Arab countries and Iran, as the RSC claims to achieve, since the current crisis is not mainly about Iran per se. In fact, this paper is challenging the RSC claims and arguments on the possibilities and the infestation of the regional arrangements to

[comprehensive security regime as a mechanism while stating that actors must recognise the issues which pose risks for regional security and must take necessary actions cooperatively in order to avert those risks from becoming full-blown threats to that security] (Jones, 1998, 7-8).

Further, the study also challenges the argument of Neoliberal institutionalism on the abilities of International Organization (IO) to restrain nation-states and resolve inter-states and intra-states disputes within its institutional bodies. In addition, the study challenges the claims on the primacy of achieving cooperation and interdependence purposes over security goals or addressing security considerations for the organization's members. It has become common knowledge now that GCC has been established to contain and balance against both Iraq and Iran. Interestingly though, one must say, it did not address how to deal with inter-organisation disputes and rivalries; this is the puzzle this paper tries to describe. If neoliberals and constructivists believe that regional organization bodies have a crucial and effective role in achieving security and stability, why did they fail to anticipate the crisis between the members of the GCC organization? Furthermore, in order to understand the current crisis considering these theoretical deficiencies, the study will adopt the perspective and claims of structural realism in explaining the current GCC crisis and the prospects on the regional system and sub-systems in the Middle East.

In brief, neorealism partially may have prospects when it comes to understanding and illuminating the origins, motivations, the role of social forces, ideational and non-material variables in constructing nation-state's policies and strategic choices. Nevertheless, it certainly can still provide a rigorous analysis of strategic and political options and explain the mechanisms of survival in the international system, especially in prone-to-conflict and hot zones such as the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. Such fields are better addressed and discussed by both neoliberal institutionalists and the English School.

The reason behind such claim is mainly ingrained structural considerations in the Gulf regional system (GRS) that were established (and still exist) before the end of World War II, and after 1968 in particular. By these considerations the study is referring to security, strategic and defence characteristics (or the so-called 'high politics') within each Gulf

state separately, or among the group of the so-called Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and the rest of the GRS.

To elaborate, given the lack of capabilities to protect their security and sovereignty and the existence of many sources of threat, primary small states are compelled to pursue and adopt realistic strategies. To protect their core values even at the expense of achieving greater economic gains, strategic rentier resources and significant geostrategic location, small GCC countries are supposed to strengthen their security and expand their influence in international forums through tools and means such as multilateralism, strategic hedging, appeasement and soft power diplomacy. GCC countries strongly believe that in international politics, survival is the most important value, not cooperation or economic gains (Waltz, 2000; Mearsheimer, 2001).

These conditions obligate small and rich Gulf States to submit to the security and defence umbrella of friendly great powers, which Gulf leaders believe to be the only protector of their sovereignty and security. This tendency illuminates why most of the third world countries had formed deep relations and bandwagoned with the US during the cold war and in the aftermath, despite relinquishing many aspects of their sovereign rights and independence. Obviously, the GCC countries realize that in the case of an outbreak of an armed conflict between them and their neighbours (or even civil wars), the European Union by its current institutional structure (that is driven by principles rather than interests) does not have the capacity or will to intervene to protect them. Unlike the US policy, which is in contrast driven by interests more than principles, and its reliance on bilateral alliances more than international institutions. Given its international and regional grievous experience, GCC states have learned that the most important value is to maintain their survival, not to realize gains, as the liberals argue. In fact, GCC countries admire the EU economic and political model, but because they coexist in an anarchic and hostile world, they prefer to remain under the U.S. umbrella.

Although the GCC countries are part of both the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) and the GRS, there are many characteristics that distinguish them from other countries in the region, especially in terms of military, security, defence, and foreign policy. These characteristics require following the claims and propositions of the realist school as a whole to

understand the nature and dialectics of the GRS dynamics (Abozaid, 2018; Abdullah, 1998; Idris, 2000; Al-Nafisi, 2000; Marhoon 1997, Saeed 1992).

Although the GCC countries are a part of the MENA region, there are many characteristics that distinguish them from other countries in the region, especially in the military and security terms. The first characteristic is that this area has always been a “Tripolar” sub-regional system. Since the end of the Second World War and after the end of the Cold War, there have always been three major players in the region: Iran, Iraq (until 2003) and Saudi Arabia (Kechichian, 1999, 233).

Secondly, conflict (not peace) has been the dominant norm in this area. Rivalries between major players never stop, whether they occur between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Iran and Iraq, or between the Gulf’s new born small states (Bahrain, Qatar, U.A.E, Oman, and Kuwait) and Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Iran (Gause, 2010).

The third characteristic is that GCC states have always felt vulnerable and exposed, either to Iran and/or Iraq which have sought to control the Gulf region since the end of British presence in the region. The behaviour of these two larger and more powerful countries is permanently identified by GCC countries as being aggressive and expansionist. Iran tried to invade Bahrain in 1971, and to this day it occupies the three Emirates’ islands (Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs), while Iraq tried to occupy Kuwait in 1990.

The fourth characteristic is that these nations have always been in a state of alliance and under the defensive umbrella of one of the great powers since the cold war (Great Britain, and the US after the British withdrawal from the East of Eden in 1971) so that they can ensure their security and maintain their survival.

The fifth characteristics shows that Saudi Arabia has always been the dominant actor in the Arabian part of the Gulf; Saudi Arabia established its own “Pax Saudica” or “sphere-of-influence” in the Arabian Gulf in the 1950s, when the Al-Saud dynasty designed the military and strategic policy in this area of the Middle East that prevented the rise of any competitors and ensured that the Arabian part of the Gulf became Mare Nostrum, a Saudi lake (Kechichian, 1999, 249).

The “GCC Unity” myth is the sixth characteristic of the GCC conglomerate; despite all signs of cooperation and convergence between

the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council organization, many observers have argued that there are many salient fears and trepidations among them. For example, Kenneth Pollock argued that due to deep disputes among the tribes over historical territories in the pre-state era, the Qatari US military bases were not established to protect them from Iran or Iraq but rather to deter Riyadh from invading Doha. Bahrain also wants to obtain an advanced defensive missiles programme, not to be an effective member of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), but rather to enhance its preventive capabilities against Qatar in case it needed to do so (Peterson, 2011). Moreover, while the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E is getting stronger, reports claim that Riyadh has started to complain about the growing power of Abu Dhabi since 2011 (Davidson, 2012).

The seventh characteristic is that this region is a fundamentally off-balance system; the GCC countries suffer from a structural imbalance of power. According to balance of power theory, the Gulf region is divided into two camps: a powerful 'Goliath' camp, which includes Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia and 'David' camp, weak and small, that includes the GCC city-states (Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, and Oman). There is a great power disadvantage between the two camps in all aspects of capabilities and possibilities (political, military, economic, etc.). Because of this imbalance, the small Gulf States thus seek to ensure their security and stability, either through alliances with great powers from outside the region or via military build-up, coalitions, and counterbalance against their hostile larger neighbours. This spiral model (to use Jervis's analogy) leads to a permanent state of tension and instability in the region (Jervis, 1976).

Lastly, this area can be characterized as a trajectory system; interestingly, most of the Arab Gulf states were established through outside agencies, the British and Americans in particular. This artificial and abnormal process of state formation makes the GRS a fundamentally externally-oriented-system, where trajectory comes from abroad to compensate for the lack of internal mechanisms to manage one's affairs. Since all great powers are in a permanent struggle over oil reserves, the external relations of GCC countries with these powers are always the ones of subordination. The internal and external political behaviours of GCC countries have been formed according to the arrangements of great powers. GCC countries cannot make any arrangements (political, diplomatic or defensive) that would be incompatible with the interests of the hegemonic

powers. The regional hegemons (Great Britain and the U.S.) rejected these attempts and did not hesitate to strike and remove these regimes from power.

In sum, these characteristics confirm the arguments of structural realism toward both small states' alignments, their behaviour toward great powers, and the supremacy of security, defence and survival considerations above any other concerns. Structural realism argues that as small, rich, and vulnerable states, GCC countries would be more inclined to bandwagon with great powers that have the ability and would be willing to protect and defend them and ensure their security and survival, as well as deter any source of domestic and external threats. On other hand, given the fact that these states exist in an anarchic self-help international order in one of the most prone-to-war regions, surrounded by hostile, malice and antagonist environments, the GCC countries will be more interested in enhancing their relations with the US than with any other great powers, as the US demonstrates an apparent will and abilities to protect and defend these monarchies.

Conclusion

The study claimed that neorealism presents a comprehensive view about the nature and prospects of the changing dynamics of regional rivalries and hostilities, which could permit and enable a more consistent understanding of the current crisis within the GCC organization and the clash of interests between its leading members. For instance, the study finds that it is hard to neglect the obvious deficit and stagnation of the GCC organization. Such a finding adds more value to the credibility of the neorealist interpretation and claims that signify the limitation of international organizations in both regional and international crises negotiation if their role(s) contradict with security concerns, or what nation-states perceive or consider a national security issue or the constitutive institutions (to use the English School terminologies) such as sovereignty and security.

Substantially, structural realism may have partial prospects when it comes to understanding and illuminating the origins, motivations, roles of social forces, ideational and non-material variables in constructing the nation-state's policies and strategic choices. Nevertheless, it certainly can still provide a rigorous analysis of strategic and political options and explain the mechanisms of survival in the international system, especially

in prone-to-conflict regions and hot zones such as the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. In general, these claims are partly correct; reconsidering the main assumptions of Waltz's theory shows that he partly touched or dealt with small states behaviour, despite his admission that he constructed his theory on the basis of the actions of major powers as the largest and most important actors in international politics (Waltz, 1979, 97-98). For example, Waltz focused on maintaining security and survival in general, but he didn't indicate how to achieve that, even for great powers. Waltz also argued that structural realism does not aim to explain the foreign policy of particular states but rather to clarify the general principles that govern the conduct of all actors in international politics (Elman, 1995; Ayoob, 2002; Ingebritsen et., al., 2006; Jesse and Dreyer, 2016).

The study also showed, based on the neorealist perspective, how the current Gulf crisis finds its origins in the persistent rivalries and struggle for leadership between some of the GCC countries (i.e., UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia). In other words, this international crisis (as it contains more than two international actors) reflects the contested leadership question in the Arabian Gulf System as well as the Arab Regional System since the outbreak of the Arab Uprising(s) in 2011 and aftermath. Day after day, it becomes clear that the dispute over foreign policy orientations and tendencies between the contestant parties is the genesis of the current crisis. According to this perspective, each actor adopts certain perceptions of the future of the region, the form of security arrangements, dynamics of the alliances (and the identification of rivals) and the agenda-sitting for Gulf and the Arab collective actions in general.

Furthermore, clearly, there is a separation between political and security divergences on the one hand, and the economic interests on the other. Since the outbreak of the crisis in 2013, the effects on economic relations and interests have been modest. The study finds that security concerns are still prevailing on institutional normative considerations, and even on gains and potential gains. The level of securitizing the crisis was also visible as highlighted by the RSC theory. For instance, on the economic level, the damages were mainly at the micro-level, while other macro-levels economic interests (such as the Qatari gas supplies to the UAE and Dubai in particular) kept away from the tension and out of the radar of the proxies of the media cold war between Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Regarding the role of the great and external powers, the study claimed that this role remains ambiguous. In fact, their attitude strongly coincides with the neorealist and neoliberal arguments that put emphasis on power and interests, and is inconsistent with the argument of the English School and RSC theory. Likewise, the role of regional powers is complicated and is still a puzzle. Interestingly, the role of regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and others, can be appropriately explained and illuminated through any of the three perspectives (neorealist, neoliberal institutionalism, and the English School). In fact, the crisis could be deconstructed and explained differently based on the position and the stand a researcher(s) adopts (strategic, economic, or normative). This finding indicates how complex and difficult it is to study or to understand the phenomena of the international relations of the Arab Gulf region and the Middle East in general, as the late Fred Halliday pointed (Halliday, 2009, 7).

Nonetheless, one of the shortcomings of such macro-level strategic and orthodox security studies is that it deliberately neglects the role of the social construction of regional security architecture which is considered a crucial element in the process of formulating the official discourse of national security strategies and threat perceptions in the current crisis in the Arabian Gulf region and among the main actors, as the English School persuasively argued.

Likewise, neorealist explanations overlooked the human and societal consequences of such military and strategic rivalries. For instance, in the case of the current GCC crisis, the social repercussions of the online and social media contentions ruined and poisoned the relationships between the Qataris, Saudis, Emiratis, and Bahrainis (and other societies beyond the Arabian Gulf region) for unknown periods. Such antagonisms and overt malignant activities, where both sides funded and produced adverse and aggressive media products (e.g., songs, documentary, propaganda, and defamation international campaigns, etc) which escalated the level of misunderstanding and hatred between the conflictual actors and their people, and led to the failure of various mediation and arbitration efforts that were carried by both the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman and the late Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah of Kuwait. In contrast to the neorealist belief, the failure of these mediation efforts was because both of Oman and Kuwait lacked the significant power or influence over the crisis parties in a way that could push toward reconciliation or trigger

de-escalation or even defuse the tension among them. The English School correctly demonstrates that such claims are genuinely reductionist since neorealists have overlooked these aspects, not only because it is a system-level theory but also due to the fallacies of its state-centric and hard-threats emphasis, which eventually underestimates its capability to accurately indicate and address the essence of such disputes, on both societal and cultural levels.

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