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REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS OF GULF MONARCHIES AND RESURGENCE OF

ISLAMIC SECTARIANISM DURING THE ARAB SPRING

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Title: _Regional Interventions of Gulf Monarchies and Resurgence of Islamic Sectarianism During the Arab Spring

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This study examines the sectarian aspect and narrative of the Arab Spring by comparatively assessing the actions and policies of three Gulf monarchies actively involved in regional conflicts: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. It argues that the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa posed a threat to the authoritarian structure of sovereignty in the Gulf, and that this danger led the political elite to adopt a variety of survival strategies, the primary goal of which was to quell opposition and, more notably, divert attention away from the revolutionary sentiment that was sweeping the region at the time. With these arguments, it becomes clearer that the Arab Spring may be better understood when viewed within the backdrop of popular dissidence and political reform efforts.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Arab Spring has shattered the illusion of stable autocratic status quo, toppling long-serving dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, upending the Assad dynasty in Syria, and contributing to the overall chaos of administration in post-Saddam Iraq. As a result of the salience of sect-centric players in the conflicts that have erupted in the aftermath of the protests—ranging from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to Saudi Arabia to Daesh and Hezbollah—many have interpreted the ongoing regional developments through the prism of Islamic sectarianism, or more specifically as a struggle for supremacy between Shi'is and Sunnis. This struggle is being framed as a regional confrontation, with the Gulf monarchies becoming engaged in response to the perceived risk of Shi'i groups and Iran taking advantage of local conflicts to expand their power and reach in the area.

Arguably, the existence of a deep Shi'i-Sunni schism had never been discussed as openly and extensively in the media, in the views of analysts and politicians, or even in everyday conversations as it has been since the beginning of the Arab Spring. However, despite the significant place sectarianism has come to assume in our perception of the region, providing a plausible explanation for its resurgence still remains a challenge for those who study its role more deeply, including what it is driven by and the political ramifications of the rhetoric associated with it. Many scholars now agree that, in approaching the Arab Spring mainly from two perspectives called primordialism and instrumentalism—which essentially debate whether sectarianism is a natural determinant or an artificial instrument of politics, the literature has been biased towards oversimplifying the unique role Islamic sectarianism plays in the relationship between religion and politics in the MENA region. Still, a consensus is far from

emerging as to what kind of theoretical approach would best capture the different aspects of the sectarian ebbs and flows of the region.

This study will examine the sectarian aspect and narrative of the Arab Spring by comparatively assessing the actions and policies of three Gulf monarchies actively involved in regional conflicts: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the State of Qatar. It will be argued that the revolts in the MENA region posed a threat to the authoritarian structure of sovereignty in the Gulf, and that this danger led the political elite to adopt a variety of survival strategies, the primary goal of which was to quell opposition and, more notably, divert attention away from the revolutionary sentiment that was sweeping the region at the time. With these arguments, it becomes clearer that the Arab Spring may be better understood when viewed within the backdrop of popular dissidence and political reform efforts. Although inter-sect animosity has galvanized specific individuals and organizations after it has been awakened, the politicization and aggravation of divisions was a result of maneuvers and manipulations by the Gulf elite to maintain their autocratic rules in the face of the “threat” of democratization.

The thesis is expected to contribute to the existing debate on sectarianism by proposing a distinctive theoretical framework, the central focus of which is the aspirations of the regimes to maintain a balance against the reformist and dissident threats (or opportunities) which were surfaced by the Arab Spring. A reassessment of the interventionist policies followed during the Arab Spring using this framework is crucial not only because it is necessary for positioning this research on empirical grounds, but also because it bears the potential to serve as a stepping stone for future research in the same direction which could help uncover a more complicated picture of Islamic sectarianism than our common wisdom suggests. This would help

decisionmakers develop a better intuition of the causes underlying regional conflicts and avoid the dangerous prospect of arriving at policy conclusions based on incomplete information.

Following this opening chapter, the second chapter will develop a distinctive theoretical framework, arguing that neither the primordialist nor the instrumentalist explanations for regional sectarian configurations in the MENA region that have prevailed over the past decade accurately portray the underlying rationales for the actions of intervening Gulf monarchies during the course of the Arab Spring. Following from that, the study will suggest a modified form of the “omnibalancing theory” as a plausible solution. With reference to the second chapter's discussion on alternative theories of regional alliance formations that incorporate regimes' calculations of threats to their survival, the third chapter will provide an account of the Arab Spring, paying particular attention to the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism in the region. The fourth chapter will draw on insights from omnibalancing theory to compare how key Gulf State decision-makers interpreted and externally responded to threats and/or opportunities they perceived to emanate from both regional and domestic forces during the course of the Arab Spring, and to explain why the policies of these three "Sunni states" became increasingly divergent with respect to both Iran, and Sunni and Shi'i Islamist groups across the region as the Arab Spring progressed. After that, the thesis will be brought to a close in the fifth chapter with an overview of the points raised throughout and a few considerations regarding their potential ramifications.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A definition proposed by Makdisi (2008) will be used throughout this study to distinguish sectarianism from the mere presence of multiple sects in a given state, which can be formulated as "politics organized along sectarian lines" (p. 559). The key assumption here is that primal and sectarian identities may serve only as intermediary factors since they are situational, fluid, and constantly evolving. As a result, they may not be plausibly posed as the only explanatory variables of actions of states. From this standpoint, the present study is also contributing to the burgeoning body of scholarship that expands the focus of discussion on Islamic sectarianism beyond the issue of whether it is driven by, or a driver of, political trends in the region. With respect to the question of what other variables should be taken into account, Kaufman (2001) highlights in his analysis of ethnic conflicts that political leaders must have a history of economic rivalry and distrust in order to be able to rally the public for furthering their personal agendas.

While it should be noted that political manipulation cannot be expected to account for everything in the region, and that state actors are not the architects of sectarian identities as such, sect-based tensions and hostilities appear to recede and then resurface at key political junctures in which legitimacy or authority of state is challenged. As a consequence of this recurrent pattern, there has been a revitalization of the contemporary authoritarian state in the MENA region, at least up until now (Zubaida, 2015). This logic holds true in the case of the Arab Spring. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the "sectarianization" of the uprisings in the region began with the realization by the Gulf regimes that only a divisive approach—by which regimes take possession of the nascent political discourse and redefine the limits of political action—could ensure their continued hold on political power. This is

a process in which rulers build on and reinterpret culturally familiar “myth-symbol complexes” (see A. D. Smith, 1987) with the aim of excusing their acts and in the long run, their ongoing existence, on the grounds that they are the only ones who can bring an end to the conflicts. Rulers succeed not because the greater part of their population favors sectarian policies, but rather because many people are afraid of sectarian players or their rhetoric, and do not recognize that the rulers they support in order to restore unity and order are the very ones that are fanning the flames of division in the first place. Against this background, the study will portray, and challenge, the dominant narratives about how the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism in the MENA region relates to the policies followed by the aforementioned three Gulf monarchies during the Arab Spring.

In spite of the reality that sectarian fault lines have been present for centuries in the MENA region, Zubaida (2014) argues that their politicization has assumed various shapes at different periods in the past, and that the recent ways in which they are politicized must be interpreted as an extension of political maneuvering on the part of the modern state. This is supported by the apparent spike in sect-related animosities during periods of political transformation, such as those that followed the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Following the onset of the Arab Spring uprisings, sectarian tensions have risen to comparable levels of intensity. Authoritarian regimes, during this period of crisis, functioned like "sectarian entrepreneurs," rewriting historical conflicts, while exploiting internal politics and external alliances in an attempt to restrain counter-activism or mobilize the crowds (p. 318). In their examinations of Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Bahraini politics; Matthiesen (2013) and Wehrey (2014a) also subscribe to this modernist treatment of sectarianism, maintaining that domestic political apparatus sow dissension among masses when they

are under pressure, resulting in an induced mobilization and intensification of sectarian sentiments.

Theories of Islamic Sectarianism

The sectarian conflict between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims has "become a catchall phrase in politics, media, and academia" since the Arab Spring (Matthiesen, 2014, p. 16). According to Wehrey (2014a), commentators, politicians, analysts, and scholars from both the Western and the Arab worlds have become practically obsessed with the issue of sectarianism (p. 11). The volume of writing on the issue, on the other hand, is not limited to the period after 2011. The Iranian revolution of 1979 generated widespread interest in the study of Shi'ism, although this fraction of Islam had received little scholarly attention before the revolution (Weiss, 2010). It was common at the time to draw comparisons between Shi'i ideology and its Sunni equivalent in terms of whether either of them was more or less politically motivated, revolutionary, quietist, aggressive in nature, and so on (e.g., J. R. I. Cole & Keddie, 1986; Keddie, 1984; McEoin, 1984). Interest in Islamic sectarianism waned in the 1990s, but it resurfaced following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, when it was hotly debated if the emergence of a "Shiite crescent" should be considered a fact or myth (Gause, 2007; Ma'oz, 2007; Nasr, 2007; Valbjørn & Bank, 2007).

Following the Arab Spring, disagreements regarding Islamic sectarianism have persisted and deepened, but they have at the same time taken on a new and different character in certain aspects. Even many who were formerly skeptical started to accept that some Shi'i-Sunni split has emerged as a significant characteristic of the MENA region (Gause, 2007, 2013, 2014). Also, the discussion has grown increasingly nuanced and complex in several respects. For instance, more attention has been drawn to the task of understanding and conceptualizing sectarianism in its various manifestations.

Apart from a debate on how the word “sectarianism” in both English and Arabic scholarship is characterized by a great deal of ambiguity (Haddad, 2017), the increasing level of conceptual attentiveness has also brought to the fore the question of whether a term originally referring to denominations within Western Christianity would make sense in an Eastern Islamic context (Gaiser, 2017; Matthiesen, 2014; Osman, 2014). In addition, it has been debated if sectarianism would better be studied as part of the wider discussion on identity politics—i.e. whether the term ethnic group constitutes a superset for sects (Abdo, 2017; Haddad, 2014; Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Phillips & Valbjørn, 2018; Valbjørn, 2019), or if it would work better to analyze sectarianism under separate subcategories such as positive/negative sectarianism, folkloric/political sectarianism, sectarianism from above/below, and instrumental/radical/banal sectarianism (Haddad, 2011; Hinnebusch, 2016; Weiss, 2010).

A different but related issue arises from the recognition that the form and scale of sectarianism not only depends on the region but also varies across sects, although in unpredictable ways at times (Wagemakers, 2016; Weiss, 2010). This was the basis of discussions concerning where and how to identify sectarianism: Would it suffice to only look at the demographic distribution of followers of a given sect? Is it necessary to focus on the discourse that people—elite or otherwise—employ in their speeches regarding their opponents and themselves? Or should we rather attend to the actual behavior of groups in terms of cooperation and conflict patterns amongst factions (Brooke, 2017; Cammett, 2019; Finnbogason *et al.*, 2019; Ghosn & Parkinson, 2019; Smyth & Zelin, 2014)?

Apart from these progressively elaborate discussions about how Islamic sectarianism can be conceptualized and identified in the MENA region, a third notable theoretical problem involves questions on the sources and effects of its rise and

development: What are the chief determinants (political, economic, or religious factors), who are the most significant players (religious figures vs. politicians, ordinary people vs. elites), how far back in history does one need to go, attention should be directed at which level of analysis—e.g., the regime/elite, state-institutional, society, regional, or global levels (Haddad, 2020)? Within the last several years, there have been a great number of discussions around the subject of how Islamic sectarianism may be justified on a theoretical level. An increasing recognition of the necessity for some sort of analytical/theoretical upgrading in the research of Sunni-Shi'i relations has accompanied this growth of interest in the subject. Accordingly, although rich in empirical evidence, this field of research has generally been descriptive, based on studies of a single case (usually of Lebanon), and without explicit statement of theoretical assumptions (Davis, 2008).

Primordialism and Instrumentalism

In 2017, Wehrey was among the first to note that "much of the discourse [on sectarianism], at both the academic and public level, has oscillated between two poles" (p. 5). In reference to Dixon (2017), these two poles were referred to as "primordial pessimism" and "instrumental optimism" (p. 5). The framing is repeated by Darwich and Fakhoury (2016) in their study on the securitization of sectarian identities in the context of the post-Arab Spring Syria. It is once again stated that the existing scholarship is split between primordial and instrumental perspectives, and that both approaches have been shown to be restricted in their ability to explain the dynamics through which identities become security concerns in some circumstances but not others. A similar portrayal can be identified in Hashemi and Postel (2017), who describe three schools of ethno-religious thinking, with constructivism serving as a happy medium between instrumentalism and primordialism. In the same volume, Nasr (2017)

also notes that “the two principal theoretical approaches in the social sciences to explain ethnic mobilization have been primordialism and instrumentalism” (p. 80). Although the exact same labels may not be used every time, the overall picture does not change. In his discussion of Syria’s violent experience with sects, Phillips (2015) examines the flaws associated with "modernist" and "primordialist" perspectives, the former of which is revealed to be remarkably close to instrumentalism in that it links sectarianism to “structural, economic, socio-cultural and political factors rather than unchanging ancient animosities” (p. 357). Writing on the same empirical subject, Lefèvre highlights how two competing ways of thinking are attempting to make sense of the present prominence of inter-sect conflict in Syria which stress the importance of either "divide and rule" or "ancient hatreds" (Matthiesen *et al.*, 2017, p. 10).

While the examples provided above are in no way exhaustive, they serve to point at the prevalent characteristic of the extant research on Islamic sectarianism, which is that they are overwhelmed by a sort of instrumentalist/primordialist dichotomy. In light of the fact that instrumentalism and primordialism are frequently discussed in the literature, it is crucial to grasp the distinguishing characteristics of these two vastly popular perspectives within the argument over the drivers and implications of Islamic sectarianism. While there are nuances and differences between the two approaches, it is possible to find general agreement in the literature about the basic assumptions of these two schools of thought and their views on the relevant levels of analysis, main actors, key drivers, and the significance of history in making sense of the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism in the MENA region, as well as the degree of fluidity and origins of sectarian identities.

When the views of primordialism (sometimes also known as “perennialism” or “essentialism”) are discussed in the context of Islamic sectarianism (e.g., Dixon, 2017;

Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Jacoby & Neggaz, 2018; Osman, 2014), they are generally tracked down to earlier works within the wider literature about nationalism, identity, and ethnicity—e.g., Smith (1987), Geertz (1961), or Shils (1957). In most cases, they are associated with notions of communal identities as natural or given, and they are grounded on a number of intangible factors with historical, cultural, traditional, and biological roots which connect people to a wider community and encourage individuals to take action in often irrational and emotional ways around them. Primordialists consider the present sectarian tensions in the MENA region to be the most recent manifestation of an ages-old tension inside the Islamic community, that dates back all the way to the infamous Battle of Karbala¹ in the year 680 CE, or even further to the succession dispute ensuing Prophet Muhammed's decease in the year 632 CE. Hence, according to primordialism, *the chief determinants underlying Islamic sectarianism are differences of doctrine between Sunni and Shi'i Islam*. A concept frequently invoked in representations of the primordialist position is "ancient hatred" (Colgan, 2015; Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Jacoby, 2017; Jacoby & Neggaz, 2018; Matthiesen *et al.*, 2017; Phillips, 2015; B. F. Salloukh, 2017a; Wehrey, 2017), which primordialists claim to be overshadowing all potential determinants of identity or conflict among the members of these societies, because of how deeply it is ingrained in their collective beliefs.

This point of view is often compared against its polar opposite: instrumentalism. When it is positioned in the wider scholarship on identity politics, nationalism, and ethnicity (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016), instrumentalist ideas are generally connected to figures such as Walt (1987) and Bates (1983), and portrayed as an extension of

¹ In Karbala, modern-day Iraq, troops sent by the Umayyad ruler Yazid I surrounded and massacred a small group led by Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Prophet Muhammad and son of Ali, the fourth caliph. The incident left deep scars on the Muslim community and emerged as a central theme of Shi'i theology.

materialism or rationalism. Identity politics is therefore perceived from a top-down viewpoint by instrumentalists (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016; Malmvig, 2015; Wehrey, 2017). Collective identities are seen as highly malleable and fluid, making them effective vehicles for elites vying for selfish interests as rational actors, whether in the financial sense of profit or political sense of influence, in order to achieve their objectives. The instrumentalist position on the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism in the MENA region is therefore vastly different from the interpretation of primordialists. Rather than focusing on religious matters and looking back at 1400 years ago in history, the instrumentalists are interpreting sectarianism as being not only primarily concerned with politics instead of religious issues but also as being changeable, recent, and modern. Islamic sectarianism, according to them, is little more than a side effect that arises as a result of economic, political, or social contestation. It is a tool of fear-mongering at the hands of the ruling elites who rely on sect-related differences to split an opposition, to divert public attention, to maintain vested patron-client interests, as an effective lever in regional rivalries, or as a springboard for rallying the masses.

Notwithstanding their deep-seated opposition, instrumentalism and primordialism are actually similar in that they are both fundamentally flawed yet very influential at the same time. As a result of the way in which it takes identities for granted and lays a heavy emphasis on an ancient past and the role of religion, primordialism is blind to, among other things, (a) the potential significance of different bases for the “self” which may be rooted in nationality, region, tribe, ethnicity, ideology, class etc. (Davis, 2008); (b) how society may be motivated more by familiar economic concerns such as "who gets what, when, and from whom" than by some ancient past or religion (Matthiesen, 2013, p. xiii); and (c) how the significance of sectarianism changes across space and time, as evidenced by many historical and current cases of intra-sectarian

conflict or inter-sectarian cooperation (Brunner, 2004; Colgan, 2015; Valbjørn & Bank, 2007). On the other hand, instrumentalism is overly elitist in that it does not take into consideration ideational factors and identities, reducing them to a form of "surface phenomenon" beneath which actual reasons lie—in a way similar to the classic Marxist concepts of basis/superstructure and false consciousness (Malmvig, 2015). As a result, the role of sects is almost downplayed to the point where it may simply be dismissed. This begs the question of why instrumentalization of sectarian identities becomes viable within a society even if no one is truly concerned with these, and why at other times it does not. Another aspect of sectarianism ignored by instrumentalists is the potential of a sectarian identity to be internalized by a group of actors, upon which it can take on its own independent life and become "sticky" (Lynch, 2013). In these instances, how people formulate their interests and perceive threats may also be affected by their sectarian identities, just as it may promote or discourage certain patterns of behavior over others. (Colgan, 2015; Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016). Thus, there are important reasons for considering that both instrumentalist and primordialist explanations fail to provide a plausible explanation of the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism in the MENA region. Given this context, it should come as no surprise that there have been numerous attempts to go beyond these two approaches.

A Third Way

In his metatheoretical account of the study of nationalism and ethnicity, Varshney (2007) arrives at the conclusion that both instrumentalism and primordialism have become outdated in their "pure" forms. A similar trend appears to be emerging in the academic discussion on Islamic sectarianism as well, with a growing body of literature agreeing that a third alternative is required in order to direct the future research on Islamic sectarianism beyond instrumentalism and primordialism. At the

same time, there have been many different suggestions as to what should constitute the so-called "third way," which makes it an overcrowded subject. As a result, despite the agreement on the need to move beyond, there has not yet emerged a new consensus on exactly how this is to be accomplished. Rather, one can identify a number of candidates for a third way, which, in simple terms, may be grouped into three main methods (Valbjørn, 2021).

The first method is to abandon the discourse associated with instrumentalism and primordialism altogether in order to substitute them with an entirely new approach, usually imported from a different field of research. The result of this method has been the introduction of a number of new potential alternatives ranging from wider theoretical trends, such as different strands of institutionalism and constructivism, historical sociology, ethno-symbolism, and critical race theory, to specific scholars such as Agamben, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Foucault, Said, or Sommers (Akbarzadeh, 2019; Dodge, 2020; Gaiser, 2017; Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Jacoby, 2017; Mabon, 2020; Malmvig, 2020, 2021; B. Salloukh *et al.*, 2015). In the second strategy, it is recognized that pure forms of instrumentalism and primordialism may be fundamentally faulty, but it is also argued that they contain valuable insights and should thus be improved rather than dismissed as they are in their current form. Various proposals have been made with the hope of addressing some of their caveats, such as merging primordialism with institutionalism or incorporating concepts from, for example, constructivism or institutionalism (Abdo, 2017; Gause, 2014; Nasr, 2017). While these two methods certainly provide a significant improvement over the classic debate between instrumentalism and primordialism, this study favors a third method which was initially called for by Sil and Katzenstein (2010) in their study on the potential advantages of "analytical eclecticism". Based on the premise that no single

theory can be sufficient to paint the whole picture with respect to a convoluted phenomenon like the resurgence of Sunni/Shi'i sectarianism, the idea here is to offer a more nuanced explanation through an eclectic method that draws on a combination of approaches.

Providing a plausible explanation for the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism during the Arab Spring requires taking into consideration more than doctrinal differences, including not only environmental dynamics such as the Syrian Civil War and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry but also the role of elites, intra-sectarian tensions, and domestic institutional factors. The multiplicity of variables renders it unrealistic to simplify the interactions between states and sub-state actors in the years ensuing the Arab Spring in a way that they cannot be categorically described as either the product (as in the case of primordialism) or the cause (as in the case of instrumentalism) of sectarian identities. Rather, they should be approached from multiple angles. With this in mind, the present study combines aspects of constructivism (to explain how sectarian identities affected risk perceptions and became internalized), institutionalism (to explain the role of weak state institutions), and instrumentalism (to explain the original motives of regional actors and domestic elites) as a series of interconnected threads of understanding which commonly provide for a better explanation of the intricate interactions among various factors and players located at social, regional, elite, and state-institutional levels. Beyond just challenging the prevalent viewpoints or combining them, this variety of conceptual tools is intended to enrich the discussion on the broader subject of whether and/or how Islamic sectarianism relates to the Gulf interventions in the Arab Spring. However, the main theoretical pillar of this subject is going to be a modified version of Gerd Nonneman's (2005) interpretation of the concept of "omnibalancing."

Omnibalancing and Domestic Determinants of Foreign Policy

In recent years, scholars of the region have increasingly recognized the importance of domestic affairs in determining alliance patterns in the MENA region. To explain regime behavior in the international sphere, they have combined constructivism with Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), neoclassical realism, the incongruence dilemma, and omnibalancing to explain regime behavior at the national level (Gause, 2014; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014; Juneau, 2015; Mason, 2014). As a result, they differ from the Waltzian neo-realist position, which holds that states' behavior in the international "system" is motivated solely by rational calculations of the existential threats posed by other countries to their survival, and that states align on this basis in order to balance against those threats. According to Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014), governments in the MENA region that are "unconsolidated" in their domestic politics do not operate as rational players in the international domain in the way that neo-realists expect them to. Specifically, according to Hinnebusch (2003), where regimes have been institutionally solidified, society serves as a source of resources and support that leaders may mobilize in order to pursue assertive foreign policies. When regimes are not firmly in place, society becomes a source of internal risks that must be "omni-balanced" in order to be avoided. As a result, in order to comprehend the foreign policy of a state, one must first study its internal characteristics.

It was Steven R. David (1991) who proposed the notion of omnibalancing as a means of explaining patterning in the "Third World," where authoritarian governments are forced to weigh both internal and external challenges while selecting how to behave in the international arena. To address more immediate and potentially catastrophic home concerns, he argues that leaders of "Third World" countries frequently placate foreign countries even if they are rivals. Furthermore, they may take actions to ensure

their personal existence at the expense of the survival of their country. Nonneman (2005) contends that, foreign policies of governments are dictated by a combination of national, regional, and international forces. To begin with, at the national domain, those factors comprise the type of the regime (i.e. whether it is authoritarian; liberalizing; rentier, and so on); the interests of the regime; the capabilities and the decision-making system of the state; and the perceptions held by decision-makers about the state's capabilities and decision-making system. Additionally, governments (by which he means their rulers) are preoccupied with their local strategic environment as well as transnational ideological challenges, according to Nonneman's analysis (specifically pan-Arabism and Islam).

Each of the terms employed by David, Hinnebusch, and Nonneman to describe the countries of the MENA region (such as "Third World," "unconsolidated state," and "developing state") is implicitly loaded with value judgments. In spite of the fact that they do not expressly label non-Western governments as "weak" (a dubious notion by any standard), they do place them lower on the hierarchy of powers than "first world," "consolidated," or "developed" states. Despite popular belief, the assumption that states in the MENA region are somehow engaged in a trajectory towards membership in the notional system of modern Western, Weberian states is by no means a foregone conclusion: the configurations of local and global politics over the last few decades suggest that they may be headed in a completely different direction. Personal patrimonial politics is increasingly being pursued by ruling elites in a transactional manner, with money being the primary weapon for preserving power and force as a secondary alternative for maintaining power. Naturally, constructivists are very critical of the premise that alliances formed by Western "powers" (as they are frequently referred to in international relations theory) are immune to domestic politics. There is

little doubt that omnibalancing is responsible for many of the regional acts of Gulf monarchies that would otherwise be considered aberrant.

The omnibalancing approach to understanding the Gulf interventions during the Arab Spring has been used on several occasions in previous literature (Nonneman, 2005; Roberts, 2017a; Ulrichsen, 2014a; Wright, 2011). In this study, the omnibalancing approach is used to understand the interventions of the Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari regimes with a number of modifications. First and foremost, although omnibalancing theorists tend to highlight regimes' reactions to threats, this study argues that regimes actively seek out opportunities that they feel would allow them to expand their economic and/or "moral" influence both at home and in other countries. Secondly, the international alliances that regimes make are not necessarily limited to other regimes, but can encompass a wide spectrum of non-state movements and individuals as well. Regimes employ punitive action in the international domain in order to fend off perceived or genuine threats on a national and international level. Those who are comfortable in their positions may pursue objectives on a transactional basis, combining political interests with security and financial interests, and regarding public office and personal interests as coterminous.

The term "omnibalancer" refers to those actors who operate on the assumption that challenges can be ideological as well as military or economic in nature. Since Barnett's (1998) constructivist analysis of how Arab nationalism shaped regional relations was published, the role of ideas, identities, and ideologies in alliance configurations has been well recognized among experts in the field. As mentioned above, instrumentalist and primordialist approaches would treat sectarian divisions as the most contentious element of regional relations during the Arab Spring. However, in terms of practical evidence, organizations promoting various types of Sunni political

Islam have all shown to be as troublesome. Religion-based groups and networks have frequently been the only forms of association permitted by regimes throughout the area throughout the post-independence period, when governments across the region have banned or outlawed political associations founded on economic or ideological grounds. Multiple administrations have emphasized the importance of Islam as a key force in the state, which has bolstered the case for religious affiliation. However, on several occasions, politically aggressive types of Islamic engagement have offered significant challenges to the legitimacy of governments.

According to Rubin (2014), the role of political Islam in shaping regional coalitions is one way to conceptualize these difficulties—primarily before the Arab Spring: “[Politico-Islamic discourse was] the most important force in Arab political discourse during the periods examined. . . as a subset of other political ideologies” (p. 5). He considers these ideologies to be the root of an “ideational security dilemma.” In tandem with this line of thought, the present study acknowledges the importance of both Sunni and Shi’i Islamist forces in motivating regional interventions during the Arab Spring, but maintains that it was not so much ideas (or identities or ideologies) that regimes balanced with or against as it was the actors and groups promoting them that were the focus of regimes’ attention (whether at the state or sub-state level). It is critical to understand the difference: Islamist organizations in different parts of the world have a variety of roles within their society, some of which strengthen the power of governing elites, while others work to subvert it. Rather than reflecting uniformly their ideologies or those promoted by the regimes *per se*, these variances frequently reflect calculations made by elites and Islamist associations themselves about whether or not it is feasible to cooperate in a mutually beneficial manner depending on how they position themselves in relation to other social and political forces. This study focuses

on how the political elites in the Gulf monarchies came up with somewhat different sets of calculations during the Arab Spring, depending on their political and economic positions.

Conclusion

In the literature on Islamic sectarianism, discussions between primordialist and instrumentalist theories have generally dominated the field. These theories consider sectarianism to be either a result, or a driver of political behavior. Despite the fact that both sides have provided valuable insights into distinct parts of sectarianism in the MENA region, neither camp has been able to fully make sense of all the moves of the players. Researchers were inspired to develop a number of third alternatives, the majority of which advocate either replacing or upgrading instrumentalist/primordialist theories. Even these methodologies, however, have been insufficient in providing a comprehensive understanding of Islamic sectarianism on their own. The purpose of this study, which is based on the assumption that the MENA is a multi-dimensional region, is to present a more elaborate explanation of the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism through an eclectic technique that incorporates a number of perspectives and ideas. In a nutshell, Nonneman's (2005) approach to omnibalancing theory will be used in order to analyze the formulation of foreign policies in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, with modifications to include concepts primarily associated with constructivism, such as the role of identities in the creation and perception of interests in the context of calculations of the political elite.

Having thus introduced its theoretical framework, the thesis will proceed in the next chapter to provide a sectarian overview of the Arab Spring—i.e., an account of those developments that took place as part of the Arab Spring and contributed to the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism in the MENA region. The chapter will also introduce

the dominant interpretations of the overviewed events, and ultimately seek to dispel them.

CHAPTER 3: ISLAMIC SECTARIANISM AND THE ARAB SPRING

Mohamed Bouazizi's widely publicized self-immolation on 18 December 2010 sent a shockwave of unprecedented civil conflicts, demonstrations, and revolutions from Tunisia across the entire MENA region. In 2011, popular uprisings resulted in the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. After military intervention by a NATO-led coalition on the side of the rebels in Libya, Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and murdered in October 2011. In Iran, these developments were initially received with great enthusiasm by the leadership, who regarded the Arab Spring as an "Islamic awakening" (Al-Smadi, 2017, p. 4). Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, presented the Islamic Republic, and the revolution through which it was created, as an example of success for the demonstrators. He encouraged the crowds to use similar methods while carrying out their own revolutions in order to create new regimes on the basis of Islamic rule by the people (DW, 2011). In sharp contrast, the autocratic Gulf monarchies were shaken to the core by the sight of long-standing Arab dictatorships coming down like a house of cards. To make the matters worse, Iran-backed militants and other armed groups of dangerous ideological orientations were rushing in to fill the vacuums of power which were opened by the failing states throughout the region. Serious measures had to be taken in order to halt the spread of the unrest before it could destabilize their countries as well. The result was a series of regional interventions which had a crucial role in aggravating conflict in countries such as Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, where pro-reform rallies linked to the Arab Spring transformed into outbreaks of sectarian violence between Sunni and Shi'i.

On the Sunni side, Saudi Arabia sought to rally fellow Sunni governments into diplomatic and military alliances against Iran, including the rest of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and, with partial success,

even Turkey for a short time. Between 2012 and 2017, these efforts amounted to sponsoring Sunni rebel armed organizations operating in Syria. In Bahrain, the Sunni Al Khalifa monarchy responded to anti-government protests staged predominantly by Shi'i (who comprise a national majority) in 2011 by appealing for Saudi military support. Under the leadership of Riyadh, the GCC responded by sending a military task force to quell riots and rallies. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE committed a considerable portion of their military forces to combatting the primarily Zaydi Houthis backed by Iran. Finally, generous donations and economic incentives were distributed to support allied Sunni governments in Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt (after the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi was ousted from his position as president). These were seen as necessary steps for preventing Sunni regimes from collapsing and/or opposing Iranian encroachment on their territories.

On the Shi'i side, Iran provided aid to the (loosely classified) Shi'i regimes during the Syrian and Iraqi uprisings, as well as to a wide range of non-state Shi'i militant regional allies, ostensibly resulting in the realization of the theoretical "Shi'i crescent" of Iranian influence. Tehran has been establishing channels of support for a variety of Shi'i regimes (such as Alawite Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and the post-2003 Iraqi government) and regional non-state armed actors since 1979. Aside from Hezbollah in Lebanon, the latter have included Iraqi Shi'i militias such as the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Mahdi Army, and Ansar Ahl Al-Haqq, Yemen's Houthi rebels, and Bahrain's anti-government militant Ashtar Brigades. During the Arab Spring, Iran intensified its support to all of these groups, as well as other anti-government organizations. When it comes to Syria, Iran dispatched thousands of Shi'i Afghan recruits to fight for the Assad regime, and it even deployed some of its own military personnel to engage in combat (Watkins, 2020). Since the Arab Spring first

arrived in Syria in the form of a series of civil demonstrations in March 2011, the country had plunged into a bloody war of attrition along its sectarian fault lines. Iran and the other regional great powers sought to exploit this opportunity, or to prevent their rivals from doing so, by providing support to the belligerent parties. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia provided support to Sunni groups and other rebels; while Russia and Iran provided support to Shi'i militants and the Assad regime.

Sentiments of dispossession and resentment felt by marginalized Sunni Muslims in Iraq provided suitable ground for a violent transnational ideology to take root and spread throughout the country. Following the formation of the "Islamic" State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from the ashes of al-Qaida, and their founding of a so-called Sunni caliphate, the threshold for violence fueled by sectarianism was escalated to previously unimagined levels of intensity. When it came to articulating an ideology, its preachers designated Shi'i Muslims as the adversary, and made references to excerpts from the principal texts of Islam in order to allow fighting with the Shi'i Muslims or even declaring it a responsibility incumbent upon all genuine believers (Rabi & Mueller, 2018). These tenets were cited as justification for the brutal executions, beheadings, and massacres perpetrated against captured troops, as well as noncombatants. On June 2014, ISIL forces initiated a massive offensive in Iraq, conquering Mosul and Tikrit, as well as portions of Kirkuk and Samarra, and then started to march south on Baghdad. In response, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a Najaf-based cleric often cited as the most influential spiritual leader of Iraqi Shi'i Muslims, issued a sectarian call to arms in his Friday sermon. The Iraqi military's war against ISIL was labeled a "sacred defense," and he guaranteed martyrdom to anybody who was killed while fighting ISIL (Rabi & Mueller, 2018). ISIL moved on to attack Iranian positions in Syria, creating a massive tactical dilemma for players who sought

to counter both Iran and ISIL influence in the area. Thus, exploitation of sectarian identities as well as the volatile geopolitical dynamics of the region contributed to the prolongation of the conflict on the battlegrounds of Iraq and Syria.

Yemen's initially internal war was quick to become enmeshed in the larger geopolitical powerplay and acquired sectarian undertones as a result. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the deposed administration, Iran was a major supporter of the Houthi rebel group. Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, the president of Yemen supported by Saudi Arabia, was compelled to flee from the capital city of Sanaa after the rebel forces managed to capture it in September 2014. The Houthi conquest of Aden and al-Hudayda, both port cities, gave the once landlocked rebels maritime supply routes via which they could directly obtain Iranian arms and equipment, which had previously been unavailable to them. Iran's state television broadcaster stated: "We are the new sultans of the Red Sea" (MEMRI, 2017). These developments were received with alarm by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The two countries shared a common apprehension regarding Yemen—that it was about to become a new venue for the regional expansion of Iranian power. The rebels never openly affirmed Iran as their patron, nor did Iran's clergy recognize the Zaydi sect of Houthis as a branch of Shi'ism. Nevertheless, the close relationship that existed between Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi (the founder of the Houthi movement) and Iranian officials was to be found difficult to disregard even for Shi'i Muslims of Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (Rabi & Mueller, 2018). Iran's offer of arms, training, and moral support to the movement was also consistent with the country's geostrategic aims and patterns of action in the area.

As one of its many sectarian implications in the MENA region, the Arab Spring heralded a period of renewed tensions between majority and minority groups. Arguably the most notable example of this was the developments that took place in Bahrain. In

14 February 2011, a large crowd of demonstrators marched to Pearl Roundabout. Encouraged by the success of the protests that had been able to overthrow repressive regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, they demanded the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Despite that Shi'i Muslims comprised the majority of the crowd, the demands of the demonstrators were not explicitly sectarian in character. Rather, they concentrated on ensuring that all people of the country had access to political and civil rights. The commencement of protests came only three days after public demonstrations forced Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from power. For the ruling family of Bahrain and the other ruling families in the Gulf, this was highly suggestive of a nightmare coming true: an Iranian-supported Shi'i revolution in Bahrain. Long before the advent of liberalization and the rising public presence of Shi'i Muslims, the Kuwaiti and Saudi regimes—both ruling over significant Shi'i populations—expressed concern about the ramifications of these developments. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia appealed to his counterpart in the Kingdom of Bahrain not to make political concessions, fearing that doing so would set a bad example and precipitate the demise of royal dynasties throughout the region. The authorities in Riyadh were also acutely conscious of the fact that the United States had altered its policy stance in the MENA region. Saudis were concerned that, given the Obama Administration's response to the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, the mass movement in Manama may receive the sanction of the United States sooner or later. Consequently, the (in)famous Pearl Roundabout emerged as a proving ground for a Gulf regime's capacity to withstand a crisis of unprecedented magnitude and scope.

The first step was a statement issued on March 11, after a gathering of the ministerial council of GCC, which discouraged "any foreign attempt to intervene in their internal affairs" (SPA, 2011). Three days after the statement, the deployment of

Saudi and Emirati soldiers to Bahrain commenced, which came right before a group of boats was due to sail from Iran to Manama for show of solidarity. Bahraini security forces were able to efficiently suppress the popular rebellion with the assistance of Saudi and Emirati soldiers. On his part, Bahraini government announced a three-month state of emergency and ordered the demolition of Pearl Roundabout. The monument on it was seen as an embodiment of the protests. The government also suspended air travel to and from Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran; while Iran's ambassador to Bahrain was expelled.

During these incidents in 2011 and 2012, Bahrain emerged as a focal point of the bitter contest between Iran and Saudi Arabia for supremacy in the region. Iranian officials declared that they were completely supporting the cause of the demonstrators. Ayatollah Ahmad Janati said in a direct address to the Bahraini demonstrators: "Brothers and sisters, resist against the enemy until you die or win" (Nikou, 2011). Conversely, Saudi authorities characterized the demonstrations as a sectarian plot that was the culmination of Iran's efforts for destabilizing the Gulf monarchies. Officials in Manama publicly accused Iran of being behind the revolts that have erupted across the country. King Hamad himself was quoted to have said: "What Bahrain has witnessed is a test from God. However, there is a foreign plot that has been in the making for at least 20 to 30 years so that the ground is ready for its execution" (Toumi, 2011). Iranian leaders, on the other hand, portrayed their country as the protector of the oppressed. Ali Akbar Salehi, Foreign Minister of Iran, wondered in a letter to the United Nations: "How can one accept that a government has proceeded to invite foreign military forces for the crackdown of its own citizens" (Nikou, 2011)?

The House of Saud and its royal counterparts in the Gulf had managed to weather the storm of the Arab Spring, holding on to their thrones in the face of the upheavals that overthrew republican despots in the North Africa. However, looking out

over the new distribution of power in the region, they would find less reason to celebrate and more reason to worry. When states failed on their borders, they were replaced by sectarian enclaves with continually changing frontiers, bringing extremism ever closer to their borders. Moreover, when the Iranian leadership looked out over the new geopolitical landscape that had arisen as a result of the Arab Spring, it saw that its own position in the area had been significantly enhanced. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Qods Force, highlighted the geostrategic reach of Iran by asserting, "Today we see the signs of the export of the revolution throughout the region, from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen, and North Africa" (Nashashibi, 2015).

Ancient Hatreds

The Arab Spring must have had rekindled certain ancient hatreds between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims. From a purely primordialist point of view, this was the most—if not the only—rational way to make sense of the events that have been narrated thus far. After all, there was an empirical correlation between sectarian difference and conflict in all four cases—Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain—and dismissing it as a simple coincidence would hardly shed any light on the subject. The ancient hatreds argument thus gained popularity after the Arab Spring, mostly in the media and among Western politicians but also in the literature (e.g., Abdo, 2017; Fisher, 2014). At the peak of inter-sectarian conflict in the region, Gause (2014) asserted that "the shorthand of Sunni versus Shia has come to dominate media and even policy analysis" (p. 5). Area specialists have typically used a solely primordial explanation for sectarian violence as a sort of straw man, with the majority of them emphasizing that regimes have utilized sect at least in part as a political tool. Important considerations they introduced to the debate on the sources of conflict included the ethnic and tribal affiliations, economic and geographical issues, as well as the influence of foreign powers, especially the

United States (Keynough, 2016; Mabon, 2013; Mason, 2014; Rubin, 2014). Likewise, the positions of members of the elite have been emphasized (Wastnidge, 2018). Empirical evidence tends to favor this position, while refuting the hypothesis of an ancient sectarian rivalry.

Firstly, while General Sisi's Egyptian regime is considered to be a part of the Sunni camp, and the Assad administration in Syria is counted in the Shi'i camp, both regimes would better be classified as secular rather than Sunni or Shi'i. Even assuming this was not the case, the Assad administration is for the most part Alawite, while the orthodox Twelver Shi'i of Iran has historically regarded Alawites as deviants, if not outright heretics (Watkins, 2020). Although they have been recognized as Shi'i in recent years, the timing of this change of mind indicates that it has been based more on Assad's pragmatic connection with Iran than on any spiritual revelation. Another similar case is that of the Zaydi Houthis in Yemen, who are descended from a group that broke away from "those who would become the Twelver Shi'a" in the 8th century CE (Louër & Rundell, 2020, p. 165). They were labeled as deviants too, and their categorization as Shi'i is also quite new. In the words of Gordon & Parkinson (2018):

The "Houthis are Shi'a" narrative should be seen for what it is – a carefully crafted piece of political rhetoric devised to gloss over important differences between religious denominations, to reinforce the false image of a war between those who identify as Sunni versus those who identify as Shi'a, and to encourage foreign – and particularly US – military intervention in Yemen. (para. 5)

Secondly, it is possible to explain Iran's support of local Shi'i militants as much of a strategic necessity as of preference. Shi'i Muslims make up a small minority of the MENA's total population—less than fifteen percent (Cooperman *et al.*, 2009). Thus, even if the claims that Iran is trying to "Shi'ify" Sunni Muslims in its area of influence

are assumed to bear some truth (Al-Hassan, 2018; Al-Saad, 2018), it would not be realistic to expect Iran to put all of its interests on the sectarian line. Instead, Iranian foreign policy has traditionally been based on promoting its image among Arab nations throughout the MENA region as the real archetype of Islamic rule—for Shi‘i and Sunni Muslims alike, as the defender of Palestine—as evinced by its support for Palestinian Sunni groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad; and as the spearhead of the axis of resistance against Western imperialism (Rubin, 2014). Under the leadership of President Ahmadinejad, Iran organized a big conference to proclaim the “Islamic Awakening” of the Arab world, as well as the ascension of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt in 2012, with the apparent intention of building a new alliance. If the Brotherhood had lasted, it would have had the potential to fundamentally alter regional power structures (Akbarzadeh, 2019). Nevertheless, many Sunni Muslims are still opposed to the Islamic Republic due to the practical reality of Iranian military aid to primarily non-Sunni forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain coupled with its apparent proclivity for undermining stability in the area (Juneau, 2016).

According to a survey of prominent Gulf media outlets conducted over the previous decade, there is a strong sense of Sunni victimhood at the hands of Iran, which borders on paranoia at times. While religious differences have been highlighted in local and international media outlets at times, they are also revealed to have been conveniently ignored at other occasions (Watkins, 2019). In this regard, much of the sectarian discourse in the region may be seen as a rhetorical apparatus used by the Gulf monarchies, and notably Saudi Arabia, to cater for primarily circumstantial needs. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this idea is supported by the fact that during the early stages of the Syrian conflict, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran initially opted to assist belligerents advocating sectarian violence; it was only after they failed in their early

attempts to promote more broad-based coalitions that they resorted to sectarian alternatives (Phillips, 2018). Also, it is possible to argue that the interventions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Egypt and Syria after 2010 were driven as much by their governments' antipathy to the Muslim Brotherhood as by a perceived need to counter Iranian influence.

New Cold War

As an apparent reaction to the ancient hatreds discourse, many scholars began to push for a more multifaceted interpretation of the Arab Spring, contending that sectarian difference is simply one of a number of intersecting elements that have impacted the overall trajectory of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry since before the Islamic Revolution. Among them, pure instrumentalists such as Salloukh (2017b) asserted that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia was manifesting itself in the form of "sectarianism as geopolitics by other means" (p. 33). Yet other instrumentalists defended that regional politics could best be analyzed in terms of a new Arab cold war, in which Saudi Arabia and Iran played the main roles, relying on third parties to compete for hegemony over the "weak states" of the region (Gause, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2019; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014; Khoury, 2013; Ryan, 2012; Valbjørn & Bank, 2007). It was Malcolm Kerr (1965) who first coined the term "the [old] Arab cold war" to explain how Arab states were formulating their foreign policies in the aftermath of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, when socialist republics had pitted themselves against Islamic monarchies in a purportedly ideological fight about the definition of Arabism. This period would last until the Iranian Revolution of 1979, after which the Arab cold war idea started to fall out of fashion, until being rediscovered again in the context of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006. This time it was Valbjørn & Bank (2007) who adapted the term to characterize the polarization between the "moderate" (generally

pro-Western) Arab governments and the “resistance” regimes with an overall anti-Western stance.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the cold war analogy gained further popularity in the literature due to the continued tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as their preference to make use of proxies rather than engaging in direct combat for gaining dominance in the region. It was suggested by Gause (2014) that:

The power of the major protagonists in the Arab cold war should be measured by their ability to affect domestic political struggles in neighboring states where weak regimes had trouble controlling their own societies and local players sought regional allies against their own domestic opponents. (p. 1)

Similarly, Hinnebusch (2019) highlights that regional competition grew more intense during the 2013-15 period due to increased interventions by Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, all of which sent fighters, arms, and money to regimes and/or rebels in failing states with fragmented identities—particularly in Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. According to him, it is crucial to note that during these interventions “each [regional] power increasingly instrumentalized sectarianism in their discourse and choice of proxies in their competitive intervention” (p. 51).

Proponents of the new Arab cold war theory have often been explicit in their recognition that alliance patterns represented more than simply a balance of power between states, and that sub-state actors and domestic risks to regime stability were also at play. Valbjørn & Bank (2012, p. 6) point out that the “narrow interstate level of the Realist-inspired Westphalian narrative” was not sufficient in providing an understanding of why Sunni and “moderate” Arab states felt the need to systematically expose their populations to scare stories regarding the growing power of Shi‘i and “radical” Iran, or in what way would this benefit the (skeptical) public, if it does so?

However, using a term such as “cold war” may be deceptive when applied to the Arab Spring. Most importantly, contrary to what might be suggested by the official rhetoric of Saudi Arabia, the “Great Powers” of the MENA region have never really been divided into blocs of an overarching bipolar system in the post-2010 period—as had been the case during the bona fide Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Attempts of the House of Saud for taking the lead of the regional opposition against Iran were not very successful; and the ostensibly Saudi-led camp was not collectively devoted to countering Iran’s influence throughout the region. Instead, some of its constituent members were more worried about dealing with different socio-political currents (usually the Muslim Brotherhood or organizations and individuals affiliated with it) which they considered to be detrimental to their greater national interests (Khatib, 2019; Watkins, 2020). The majority of Arab rulers who were in power after the Arab Spring showed interest in securing zero-sum advantages against regional contenders, as much as they were preoccupied with carrying out defensive and offensive interventions for ensuring the survival of their own regimes. Although there is little doubt that these policies had a role in determining the fates of those “weak states” and conflicts in which they intervened, no evidence suggests so far that they have been able to achieve the results they desired from these endeavors.

Several years after the Arab Spring started, the conflicting interests of the nominal Sunni bloc became clearly visible. Authorities in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were vocal regarding their opposition to financial and political support provided to the Muslim Brotherhood and associated Islamic groups in Libya, Egypt, and Syria by Qatar and Turkey. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were selectively backing groups that were opposed to the Brotherhood in these countries, irrespectively of whether they are secular or Islamist groups. In Syria, this evolved into a situation in which the parties

repeatedly outbid each other as they competed for rebel proxies, effectively shattering all hopes for a united front against Bashar al-Assad and his allies (Baylouny & Mullins, 2018; Phillips, 2016). Turkey had already given up on the idea of assisting opposition forces in their efforts to overthrow the Assad regime by 2016, preferring to concentrate on its own fight in Northeastern Syria, where Kurdish militants linked to the Turkey-based terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) started to pose a threat. The Saudi-led embargo of Qatar, which lasted from 2017 to 2021, exposed the extent of tensions that existed between the governments in Doha and Riyadh. During the years in blockade, Qatar further softened its stance against Iran, while Saudi Arabia continues to keep a firm position against Tehran in a number of theaters. Even more enduring relationships, such as the one between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, were beginning to show signs of strain when the military campaigns of the two countries diverged in Yemen (Leaf & DeLozier, 2018).

In the midst of an uncertainty caused by unresolved intra-sectarian disputes, the analogy of a new cold war would be far from ideal in terms of accurately framing the geopolitical regime under which the regional system operates. Rather, a new age of multi-polarity, or, as Gause (2017) describes it, “underbalancing,” has begun to take hold among the countries affected by the Arab Spring. Taking a look at the sectarian landscape of the MENA region during the Arab Spring, it is perhaps temptingly convenient to read the picture as a conflict between Shi‘i actors under Iranian leadership and Sunni actors under Saudi leadership (Ryan, 2012). However, geopolitics of the region is more complicated than such a framing would suggest. National, ethnic and religious denominations interact with local identities in many countries, while being rooted in ideology and class as well (Mabon, 2020). Finally, it is important that we do not dismiss the agency of domestic actors within the regional scope of this battle. As

will soon be discussed in more detail, an intricate interplay of local and global actors—whose networks often transcend state borders—gives shape to the political space of the MENA region. Regional rivalry between elites takes place in this space within the context of internal political strife, and is often underpinned by shared parochial concerns.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring started as an effort at political emancipation, but in many cases it “evolved” in unexpected directions, having unintended repercussions for local politics which were infiltrated by foreign powers and their supporters in these countries. The quest for ascendancy over the region ended up pitching regional and international forces against one another in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain. With the rise of a geopolitical battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, who conflated sectarian identity with regime interest, differences more acrimonious than politics—such as sectarian identities—took on new significance. As a result, the Arab Spring’s “evolution” was marked by an increased focus on sectarianism (Mabon, 2013).

Conflicts, in many of the countries affected by the Arab Spring, started to be increasingly framed as taking place between followers of different sects. This meant that primordialist accounts appeared to give plausible explanations of international developments within the area for a brief period of time. Such accounts were supported by patterns of foreign backing received by domestic actors through interventions, which seemed to be largely in congruence with sectarian affiliations of the parties involved. Moreover, an interpretation of events emphasizing “ancient hatreds” was reinforced by the fact that the primary protagonists in these initiatives (the Saudi monarch and the theocracy controlling Iran) claimed moral leadership of Sunni and Shi‘i Islam across the globe. In contrast, proponents of instrumentalist interpretations would posit that the

belligerents of these conflicts were not Sunni and Shi'i Islam, but rather Saudi Arabia and Iran (and their allies), who were pitted against one another in a violent competition for hegemony in the region. The two regional giants were wrestling for control over Bahrain and waging a proxy war on the battlefields of Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. As discussed in detail, this was considered by many to be a manifestation of a “new cold war” in the Middle East.

This chapter has shown that while both the ancient hatreds and the new cold war explanations enjoy a degree of empirical support, it does not take much effort to find out that there is also a plethora of evidence which actually undermines them. Each of the explanations succeeds in where the other fails—which perhaps makes them complement each other, yet it is not possible to apply either or both of them in a logically consistent manner onto the entirety of the case of sectarianism in the Arab Spring. This is partly due to the fact that the causes which influence sectarian conflict in Bahrain are fundamentally different from those that influence it in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen. Individual communities in each of these states have their own histories that are shaped by social, political, and economic circumstances. When these histories interact with sectarian metanarratives, they can result in distinct manifestations of difference that are not present in the other states. There is, in many respects, a significant difference between the two sects and the individuals who identify with those communities. However, there is nothing intrinsically violent about such a distinction. Instead, sectarian conflict appears to be an unavoidable phenomenon that erupts in the midst of socio-political instability, uncertainty, and fear, gaining traction in the midst of fragmentation. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this was exactly the case during the Arab Spring. Furthermore, as an examination of the internal issues that prompted interventions by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar will reveal, conflict was

always motivated more by parochial interests than by religious difference or regional power.

CHAPTER 4: EXPLAINING GULF INTERVENTIONS

This chapter will build upon Nonneman's interpretation of omnibalancing, looking at how the regional interventions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar during the Arab Spring were largely motivated by elite perceptions of identity-based opportunities and threats related to regime security in both the regional and the domestic settings. It will be pointed out that among calculated opportunities and threats, Sunni organizations espousing a politically active interpretation of Islam figured not less, and often even more, prominently than Shi'i aggression. Such insights call into question the mainstream sectarian narratives of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, which are based on the theories of primordialism and instrumentalism. It is also revealed in this way that in order to explain the political dynamics of the MENA region, it is necessary to avoid excessive reliance on classical Westphalian theories which fail to take into account the role of non-state actors, and to recognize that even actors with no hard power can quickly alter the terms of regional relations with their disruptive potential.

The six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially the richest—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait—have a number of institutional, structural, and economic commonalities. Indeed, the establishment of the Council was made possible by these commonalities in the first place (Barnett & Gause, 1998). As rentier economies, a great portion of their income hinges upon the export of their large hydrocarbon deposits, which is a factor that significantly influences their foreign policies. Politically, they have been usually successful on the home front, holding the line against vocal opposition. Even if their individual institutional arrangements have not evolved in the same way, each of the six states is reigned over by some member of

a royal family who seeks to retain allegiance through a web of relations based on patronage, while maintaining direct personal command over governmental appointments. Each of the six monarchs has a similar approach to foreign affairs. As noted by Baabood (2003):

In the GCC states, the trend has been that most of the policy makers are from the ruling families or from the most trusted ruling class. This is particularly so in foreign policy making and in the post of their foreign ministers. (p. 226)

Young (2015) has suggested more recently that it is necessary to reevaluate several of the assumptions concerning processes of decision-making and institutionalization in the GCC. The extent of “stateness” in the GCC has increased, according to him, partially as a result of market sophistication and economic resources, global recognition of the GCC, and dramatically amplified military expenditure in certain GCC members. It is certain that GCC countries have been undergoing change, and perhaps the greatest evidence of this is the foreign policies pursued by three of them—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, which have grown considerably more assertive in the last decade. As will be revealed in the following sections, it is possible to attribute much of this change in behavior during the Arab Spring to individual calculations of some members of the royalty with respect to identity-based opportunities and threats.

Saudi Arabia

Throughout its history of rivalry with postrevolutionary Iran, Saudi Arabia has often found itself having to conduct foreign policy under the daunting pressure of regional exigencies. Having enormous resources but a relatively small military made it unavoidable to have severe security concerns for a Western ally in the middle of nationalist regimes with larger armies, larger populations, but smaller budgets. As put

by Hinnebusch (2003):

Saudis long feared encirclement from various combinations of the republican and Marxist Yemens in the south, Islamic Iran, and Ba‘thist Iraq. External threats all had a trans-state dimension: the Saudis perceive the Middle East as a cauldron of instability that could spill across their borders, a product of their experience with Nasserism in the 1960s. (p. 131)

On a number of occasions, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to various armed groups, including in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Palestine. However, until the Arab Spring, the Saudi leadership refrained from using its own military for intervening in the internal affairs of other states in the region. The Kingdom instead depended largely on the protection of the United States for its regional security while itself focused on the promotion of its soft power abroad (Pollack, 2002).

For more than four decades, Saudis financed peaceful Islamic organizations throughout the MENA region and beyond, notably those linked with Wahhabism and other conservative Sunni ideologies. However, Washington’s declining interests and shifting goals in the region drove them to take an increasingly “hard power” oriented stance in regional politics, especially during the Arab Spring. The Obama administration not only refused to take any major military action to handle the Syrian crisis, but also announced that it supported the democratic transition in Egypt despite pressure from Riyadh, which resulted in the election of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, the Saudi royal family began to realize how important it was for their survival to take the matters into their own hands, as shown by their interventions in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen (Hassan, 2015).

Iran and the Shi‘i

In spite of its initial efforts for maintaining the autocratic status quo in countries

where people demanded reform, Saudi Arabia came out in support of Syrian opposition in late 2011, in an effort to balance against the growing presence of Iran in the Levant (Blanga, 2017). The war also presented a chance for Saudi Arabia to help instate a government in Syria that is more sympathetic to its ruling family than to the Iranian regime (Watkins, 2020). In practice, the civil war in Syria had enabled an unprecedented number of Iranian military personnel to set foot on Syrian soil, many of whom served in the 65th Airborne Special Forces Brigade (NOHED Brigade) or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including its external operations branch, the Quds Force, and its voluntary mobilization unit, the Basij (Khatib, 2019). Iranians also intensified their activity in other parts of the Middle East through a number of contacts with radical extremist figures and several armed groups, which primarily consisted of Shi'i proxy forces such as the Iraqi Badr Organization, the Islamic Dawa Party, and Hezbollah (Friedman, 2018; Steinberg, 2017). It has been reported that the individuals have included military chiefs and senior officials of al-Qaeda such as Yasin al-Suri, Saif al-Adel, Abu Bakr Muhammad Muhammad Ghumayn, and Faisal Jassim Mohammed al-Amri al-Khaldi, all of whom were claimed to have taken shelter in Iran and have been receiving support in their quest against the Saudi regime (CNN Arabic, 2016; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2016).

It was clear from how Saudi Arabia responded to the Arab Spring that its leadership was concerned about domestic threats at least as much as those at the regional level. It is highly likely that the royal family felt alarmed by Iran's growing influence in Syria and the rest of the Levant. However, in the Arabian Peninsula, it misjudged or purposefully exaggerated the risk represented by Iran. The Iranian meddling in the domestic affairs of Arab regimes, and instigation of civil conflicts in Bahrain and Yemen were heavily used by Saudi Arabia for justifying military

interventions, even if that interference was in both cases limited in practice (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016; Juneau, 2016; Mabon, 2018; Matthiesen, 2013; Zweiri, 2016). Aside from the meager prospect of Iran launching an all-out war against Saudi Arabia, the real threat posed by the Islamic Republic was arising from its potential to incite rebellion among the Kingdom's native Shi'i community.

As mentioned above, the rulers of Saudi Arabia have historically relied on financial methods for expanding their influence and evaded military conflicts unless regarded as a matter of regime security. The Kingdom's interventions during the Arab Spring were consistent with this reasoning, since they were considered vital in the long-term for the resilience of authoritarian governments in the MENA region. The fact that the interventions were carried out despite the possibility of unwanted repercussions demonstrates how great the danger was from their perspective (Wehrey, 2014a). Perhaps the most dangerous among these possible repercussions were the politicization of the Saudi public in general, and the further marginalization of its Shi'i minority. The latter posed the greater risk, however, considering how such interventions against Shi'i movements could be exploited by both non-state actors and Iran, for the purpose of galvanizing Shi'i communities within Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC (Matthiesen, 2014). Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Shi'i minorities have been periodically vocal with respect to their political demands, and although they now appear to be under control, their political volatility remains a persistent concern throughout the Gulf region.

Shi'i Muslims are estimated to account for around ten to fifteen percent of the population of Saudi Arabia (Cooperman et al., 2009, p. 10). Twelver Shi'is living in the Eastern Province comprise the bulk of this population. The Eastern Province is strategically crucial for Saudi Arabia, owing to its concentration of oil fields. There is

also a smaller community of Shi'i Muslims in Najran, most of whom are Isma'ilis. Both groups have been, by design, at odds with the Saudi regime since its inception, at least ideologically. Since 1744, the tribe of Saud has been deriving its religious legitimacy from its role as protectors of Wahhabism—a puritanic strain of Sunni Islam that considers Shi'i Muslims to be heretics. After 1979, Riyadh's concerns regarding a possible domino effect of the Iranian Revolution were sporadically fueled by internal Shi'i political activism, especially taking into consideration Ayatollah Khomeini's declared desire to export the revolution. The Saudi regime has made several attempts to integrate the Shi'i population into the national fabric, but it has continually suppressed their religious observances while also limiting their political involvement. The country's government had never included a Shi'i minister prior to 2014 (Wehrey, 2013).

The Shi'i minority of the Eastern Province first gathered on March 2011 to protest against the discriminatory practices they were subjected to, and have been able to keep the movement alive until 2012 despite several attempts of the regime to put an end to their activities (Wehrey, 2014a). When the protests were finally put down, a number of Shi'i activists were arrested and imprisoned by the leadership, including the popular cleric Nimr al-Nimr. He was executed in 2016 together with 46 others on terrorism-related crimes. Al-Nimr was an activist with huge influence among Shi'i youth, as well as an outspoken critic of the Saudi state (Wehrey, 2014a). He had been pushing the authorities to provide religious freedom and equal rights to all citizens of Saudi Arabia, and to discontinue their policy of systematic discrimination against Shi'i Muslims. He had also warned that the persecution of Shi'i Muslims at the hands of Al Saud, if not stopped, would soon bring the end of their oppressive regime (Matthiesen, 2014). These and similar statements made by other nonconformists were denounced as

“fitnah” (sedition) by the authorities, or as vicious attempts of Iran and its allies to undermine domestic peace and stability in the Kingdom. These rhetorical maneuvers were, as put forth by Hassan (2015), “easily done, drawing on notions that the Shia population represents a ‘fifth column’ under Iranian authority” (p. 487). Similarly, al-Rasheed (2011) suggests that in order to counter a possible revolution, sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims were purposefully deepened by the Saudi regime, which sought to depict the demonstrations as a conspiracy of Shi‘i minority against the Sunnis and thus deprive the movement of widespread backing of the Sunni majority. Wahhabi clerics loyal to the official ideology were encouraged by the administration to condemn demonstrators and “neo-Wahhabis” were permitted to broadcast content distinctively anti-Shi‘i in nature.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Demonizing the Shi‘i minority may also have been seen as a necessary step to divert public attention away from the reality that a segment of the Sunni clerical establishment was likewise viewed with distrust by the Saudi regime, which the Arab Spring had made even worse. To be more specific, the Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be an irreconcilable enemy by the Saudi leadership due to their divergent political aims. However, things were not always like that.

The Saudi regime has historically had a tumultuous relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, both within the Kingdom and abroad. Following Gamal Abdul Nasser’s crackdown of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1950s, thousands of Brotherhood members sought refuge in Saudi Arabia, where many had been able to rise to key positions in the Islamic University of Medina, the Ministry of Education, and other institutions (Farquhar, 2017; Lacroix, 2014). As a result, they played an important part in the development of Islamic politics in the country. However, things took a

different turn with the rise of the al-Sahwa movement, when a group of Saudi scholars sympathetic to the cause of Egypt's Brotherhood started expressing that they had the right to exercise a greater degree of political autonomy in decision-making. They also criticized the regime, particularly because of its collaboration with the United States. The authorities responded to the ensuing crisis by partial co-optation and partial suppression of the scholars affiliated with the movement. The Muslim Brotherhood was commonly blamed by senior government officials for providing assistance to the al-Sahwa movement. Prince Nayef, the then Minister of Interior, pointed out at the Brotherhood as the root of every problem in Saudi Arabia: "Without any hesitation I say it, that our problems, all of them, came from the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood" (Schanzer & Weinberg, 2013). While more favorable ties were later on reestablished for a short time, suspicions continued to grow under the surface (Lacroix, 2014). Accordingly, although formerly viewed as a potential ally against Nasserists and the pan-Arab socialists, the ideational outreach and expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia started to be hampered in the 1980s, and continually declined throughout the 1990s (Al-Rasheed, 2006; Hussain, 2012).

Although the Saud dynasty owes much of its current political significance to a historical alliance with the Wahhabi founder Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab—which paved the way for the establishment of the first Saudi state (Al-Rasheed, 2010), Wahhabism has long been nurtured in a tradition of political quietism, with members of the clergy being appointed to governmental positions in order to ensure their continual allegiance to the Saudi royal family. In this way, the Saudi system dictates that religious authority remains at a subservient position vis-à-vis the political authority, in direct opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood's perspective, which envisages a central position for religion in politics. In other words, while Saudis are infamous for treating

Islam as a convenient tool that can serve political ends, Muslim Brotherhood sees politics, if not the entire state apparatus, as an instrument that must be used to advance Islamic goals (Al-Rasheed, 2010; ‘Anānī, 2016; Khatib, 2019; Munson, 2001; Sulaib, 2020; Tadros, 2012; Vasil’ev, 1997). A source close to the royal family is claimed to have disclosed that Saudis perceived the Muslim Brotherhood as such a great threat to their existence that even the Shi‘i minority of the country could not come close (Baer, 2013). This Brotherhood phobia seems to be a recognition by the royal family that their legitimacy at home is frail and vulnerable, and that the Muslim Brotherhood still enjoys considerable influence in Saudi Arabia, not only among citizens but also among the vast majority of migrant workers (Baer, 2013).

In 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Ennahda Movement’s ascent to power in Tunisia and in 2012, the election of a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi, as president of Egypt rekindled Al Saud’s fears about the actual political ambitions of the Brotherhood. Following Morsi's removal from power in 2013, the Saudi administration was ready to lend financial assistance to the military dictatorship that overthrew him. Meanwhile in Syria, for the sake of isolating rebel groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime first supported secular groups, and then turned towards more radical Salafist and other "anti-Brotherhood" groups, including Jaysh al-Islam, the leader of which publicly advocated sectarian violence among his followers (Phillips, 2018).

In the course of the Arab Spring, the Saudi regime appeared to overlook the existence of the Muslim Brotherhood only in Bahrain, where the group was known as al-Member Islamic Society. The ruling Al Khalifa family continued enjoying good relations with al-Member, which it saw as a Sunni ally against the politically demanding Shi‘i majority. All other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood were designated as

terrorist groups by the Saudi leadership in 2014, along with a number of other Islamic groups that Qatar was backing at the time. The government also attempted to extort some support from ex-members of the al-Sahwa movement with the aim of bolstering its domestic position. However, this was only partially effective. Notably, a former al-Sahwa intellectual named Salman al-Ouda refused to comply despite his widespread popularity. Al-Ouda was arrested in 2017 along with some other former al-Sahwa clerics, and still faces the death penalty. The Muslim Brotherhood chapter in Yemen, al-Islah, despite having been listed as a terrorist organization by the regime, was regarded as a strategic ally by the Saudi-led military coalition when found expedient. Evidently, the risk posed by al-Islah is seen to be lower than that of the Houthis insurgency on the ground there. Likewise, Saudis have maintained an ambiguous attitude with al-Qaeda (Abdul-Ahad, 2018; Fenton-Harvey, 2018). Officially, they have condemned the terrorist network, but de facto, they kept striking bargains with the Yemeni part of the group, in much the same way as their domestic tradition of acquiring loyalty in exchange for money. It is possible that these inconsistencies are a result of the peculiarities of Saudi Arabia's policymaking routines.

Foreign Policy as Personal Agendas

In the case of Saudi Arabia, domestic constituencies weigh at least as heavily as the external factors in how foreign policy is applied, articulated, revised, and sometimes even reversed. Several domestic characteristics—such as economic, religious, tribal, and familial—feed into the foreign policy making process in the Kingdom (Partrick, 2016). In order to determine foreign policy, key royals and the King rely on personal relationships and business-like arrangements that, when commercialized, resemble a political marketplace (Watkins, 2020). Operations of Saudi Arabia in Yemen are archetypal in this regard: Yemeni leaders and potentates make

deals directly with the Saudi King, who—as if the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia did not exist—supplies them with cash, arms and similar material benefits. Recent years have also seen a rise in the prominence of certain trustworthy officials in the field of foreign policy. Nevertheless, reactions of Saudi Arabia to the Arab Spring have been mostly shaped by a small number of elite people, each with their own personal agendas and threat perceptions.

As de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia following his brother's stroke in 1995, and as King in 2005, Abdullah pursued a number of rapprochement policies with Iran in the post-Khomeini era, during the leaderships of Khatami and Rafsanjani. Partially driven by shared fears about the continued assertiveness of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime, several high-level official visits resulted in a series of bilateral agreements with Iran, increasing collaboration on security problems in the Gulf (Mabon, 2013). Initially, Abdullah's priority in dealing with the Arab Spring was to take conservative steps in order to maintain the status quo. The appointment of Bandar bin Sultan in 2012 as director general of the Saudi Intelligence Agency, on the other hand, was interpreted as a move to adopt a more confrontational position towards Iran (Khashan, 2014). Bandar was entrusted with organizing the Kingdom's support for the Syrian rebel movement in 2014, but this policy was considered a failure and he was dismissed. In the end, Saudi Arabia decided to limit its engagement in the Syrian conflict.

King Abdullah's brother Salman ascended to the throne following the former's death in 2015. Salman chose his nephew Prince Muhammed Bin Nayef as Crown Prince and Minister of Interior. Adel al-Jubeir was named Foreign Minister, marking only the second time in history that a non-royal was brought to this position. The unusually harsh treatment of Shi'i demonstrators by the Crown Prince in 2011 was purportedly motivated by Shi'i activists' persistent criticism of his father, Prince Nayef, who had

repressed any movement in the Eastern Province for more than 30 years in his capacity as Interior Minister (Karim, 2017).

From 2015 onwards, Mohammed bin Salman, the new Defense Minister and deputy Crown Prince, has had the most influential role in shaping Saudi foreign policy, even before he was nominated to succeed Muhammad bin Nayef in 2017 as Crown Prince. Neither the decision to send troops to Yemen in support of the country's faltering leader, nor the formation of a huge Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition was a foregone policy conclusion. Instead, it seems to have emanated from Mohammed bin Salman's pervasive influence and ambitions, as well as those of Brigadier General Ahmed al-Assiri, his deputy Defense Minister. When Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation in late 2017 while on a visit to Saudi Arabia, this too was widely believed to be connected to Mohammed bin Salman and his geopolitical stand-off with Hezbollah and Iran. The Crown Prince is accused of appealing to nationalist Sunni sectarianism on the home front, while in exchange, demanding complete compliance from the Sunni religious establishment of Saudi Arabia. His idea of launching a campaign of arrests against obstinate members of the clergy led to the aforementioned imprisonment of Salman al-Ouda in 2018. The public visibility of the Crown Prince was toned down after being implicated in the killing of nonconformist Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Although he had mostly reclaimed his international prominence by the following year, Mohammed bin Salman's aggressive behaviors are yet to yield tangible benefits for Saudi Arabia at the regional level.

The UAE and Qatar

The UAE and Qatar are similar in many ways. With analogous cultural motifs, a shared perspective to the social function of religion, tribal and family ties that deeply

permeate and cut across both communities, and parallel formative experiences after gaining the status of sovereign nations, they have more in common than that which separates them. Indeed, the deep commonalities between the Gulf emirates led to a discussion regarding the creation of a new regional federation in 1968, when the British declared their decision to withdraw from the Gulf. Abu Dhabi and Dubai merged in February 1968, while the rulers of Qatar and Bahrain convened with their counterparts in the seven constituent emirates of the Trucial States (as the British government then referred to the UAE) and “released a communique announcing a ‘Federation of Arab Emirates’ to take effect from March 30, 1968” (Brewer, 1969, p. 154). Eventually, Bahrain and Qatar were forced by their historical problems with each other to withdraw from the proposed Federation of Arab Emirates, while the seven Trucial States proceeded to form the United Arab Emirates (Peck, 1986; Schofield, 2011; S. C. Smith, 2004). In the decades to come, UAE-Qatar relations progressed in relative cordiality, but their reactions to the Arab Spring revealed fundamental divisions.

Although Qatar’s state-funded news network Al Jazeera was criticized for its coverage of the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia and was accused of fueling the uprisings in Egypt, it was the spread of unrest to Libya that triggered both the UAE and Qatar to adopt a more active stance in the Arab Spring. Both states contributed to Operation Unified Protector of NATO starting at the end of March 2011, committing jet fighters and providing other military, financial, and diplomatic support (P. Cole & McQuinn, 2015; Dagher et al., 2011; Engelbrekt et al., 2014). However, union was not to last. The question of which rebel groups to promote soon led to discord between the two regimes. Qatar was quick to be recognized as a large-scale backer of groups and individuals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and with good reason. Among Qatar’s most significant connections was Ali al-Sallabi, a Libyan cleric who had resided in Doha for

a long time after being exiled by Gaddafi (Fisher, 2011; Roberts, 2013). The son of a founder of the Benghazi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Sallabi emerged as an "ideological guide" for the broader Libyan Brotherhood (P. Cole & Khan, 2015, p. 68). Through al-Sallabi, Qatar financed the efforts of his brother, Ismail al-Sallabi, and Abdelhakim Belhaj, the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group affiliated with al-Qaeda, to form a militia group named Rafallah al-Sahati Companies (Ulrichsen, 2014b). Egypt was another theatre where Qatar supported those it classified as moderate Islamists. Following Mohammad Morsi's victory in the presidential elections of June 2012, Qatar lent tens of billions of dollars to the Central Bank of Egypt, pledged comparable amounts in investment to boost the economy, delivered free shipments of LNG, and furnished the newly formed government with dedicated Al Jazeera coverage (Al-Qassemi, 2012; Cunningham, 2014; S. Kerr, 2013). Indeed, a sister channel called Mubasher Misr (literally "Egypt Live") was set up by Al Jazeera purely for the purpose of broadcasting Egyptian politics.

Likewise, Qatar's most critical relationship in Syria "was with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its associates" (Hokayem, 2014, p. 66; Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013). Candidates associated with the group received Qatar's support for political office, such as Ghassan Hitto's seven-month tenure as provisional head of Syria's government in exile. Between 2011 and 2013, Qatar is estimated to have provided around \$3 billion worth of arms and equipment to an assortment of rebel groups in Syria (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013; Mazzetti et al., 2013; Phillips, 2013). Some groups fragmented as the war progressed, some grew more radical, and hardliners gradually started to claim charge of the opposition (Jenkins, 2014). Qatar also kept ties with al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham (Blair & Spencer, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2014; Roberts, 2015; Taştekin, 2013).

The UAE followed a less active Syrian policy than Qatar, though elsewhere it tended to side with groups that shared a particular hostility against the Muslim Brotherhood (Hokayem, 2014). In June 2013, the UAE leadership welcomed the Egyptian military coup led by Sisi in which Mohamed Morsi was arrested after being overthrown. The Qatari funds that had been supporting the economy and promised future investment was replaced by the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia. As conflict degraded into another civil war in Libya, the UAE established links with an array of mostly anti-Islamist groups including the Libyan National Army led by General Haftar, and the Zintan Brigades militia (Wehrey, 2014b). The UAE deployed its jet fighters against Islamist forces, as they struggled to capture an airport in Tripoli from the Zintan Brigades. While this maneuver proved futile, it revealed the connection between the UAE and the Zintan Brigades. Likewise, it was reported that special forces of the UAE played a role in the destruction of Islamist camps in the eastern part of the country (Kirkpatrick & Schmitt, 2014; Lewis, 2017). Thus, the UAE sought to back forces widely lined up against Islamist actors, while Qatar tended to back Islamist actors like the Muslim Brotherhood (Black, 2014; Roberts, 2019a).

This divergence in foreign policies soon complicated the relations between Qatar and its regional allies. Shortly after ascending the throne, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and his administration was subject to pressure to abandon key policies. In July 2017, it was leaked to the press that the new Qatari emir had made a secret agreement in Riyadh in November 2013 (Sciutto & Herb, 2017). The agreement stipulated that Qatar avoided intervening in the domestic affairs of other states, stopped providing support to “deviant” groups, and saw that Sisi’s military regime was not covered critically in Al Jazeera. In March 2014; Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in protest of the latter’s slow implementation

of the secret agreement (Abdullah, 2014). This was followed by a prolonged and acrimonious debate at the social level which helped further strain UAE-Qatar relations (see, for example, Agence France-Presse, 2014).

Sheikh Tamim and the other regional leaders signed another secret agreement in November 2014, in which Qatar conceded to, among other things, more demands directed towards protecting the image of the Sisi regime. This allowed the ambassadors to return later that month, and the GCC's annual summit, which was set to take place in Doha, proceeded as planned. The summit signaled, however, that certain frictions persisted, as the leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman were not present, and the event lasted for only one day, unlike the usual two days (Al-Ibrahim, 2014).

Some of the conditions specified in the Riyadh agreements were fulfilled by Qatar. In 2014, several leading Muslim Brotherhood figures departed from Qatar (Maged, 2014; Masr, 2014). Qatar did, however, try to reconcile the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt's government in August 2015. Apart from tactical compromises, this indicated that Qatar's long-term goal was to maintain ties with the group (Al Arabiya, 2015a).

The extent to which these concerns were unresolved became evident in June 2017, when a sudden blockade was imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, joined by a handful of other states. In addition to severing diplomatic relations, they expelled all Qatari nationals in their countries within two weeks, closed their airspace for all air traffic to and from Qatar, and refused to give docking permission to ships headed towards Qatar (Roberts, 2019). Although a clampdown like this had not been seen before, Qatar proved more resilient than anticipated and managed to withstand it with no permanent damage (Omran, 2017; Sick, 2017). Having failed to achieve the desired effect, the blockade was lifted at a

GCC summit in January 2021. However, the core differences that divide Qatar and the league that formed against it are yet to be addressed (i.e., how to approach the Muslim Brotherhood, and which regional actors are acceptable to sponsor).

The UAE

Despite their common sociopolitical, religious, and cultural background; current political structures of the UAE and Qatar are highly dissimilar. The UAE is a federation of seven constituent emirates, among which wealth and power are not distributed equally. Perhaps due to the sensitivity of the UAE leadership about the subject, it is not easy to obtain up-to-date and precise statistical data on this. Even so, it is evident that Abu Dhabi is considerably richer than the rest of the emirates. Possessing the overwhelming bulk of the hydrocarbon deposits, Abu Dhabi contributed more than half of the UAE's total GDP in 2016. Within the same year, Dubai accounted for nearly 30%, exceeding the combined output of Sharjah and the four tiny emirates in the north—Ras al-Khaima, Umm al-Qurain, Ajman, and Fujairah (Oxford Business Group, 2016a, 2016b; see also Kargbo-Sical et al., 2018). While benefitting from Abu Dhabi's financial support, the smaller emirates clearly lack behind in development. Throughout the 2000s, they suffered from a high level of unemployment, as well as frequent power and water outages (Fayed, 2011). In 2011, however, with the start of the Arab Spring, the federal administration was quick to announce a massive investment plan for the region, which could help assuage any socioeconomically driven unrest (S. Kerr, 2011; Salama, 2010).

The divergent foreign agendas long expressed by its individual emirates is another consequence of the UAE's federal structure (Early, 2015). During much of the 1980s, there was disagreement between the emirates about the Iran-Iraq War. Dubai and Sharjah kept more agreeable relations with Iran, while Abu Dhabi stayed strictly

on the side of Iraq (Early, 2015; Young, 2014). Over the following years, Dubai acted with the practical reasoning of a regional hub of commerce and maintained economic ties with Iran, while Abu Dhabi's staunch opposition against Iran only grew sterner (Davidson, 2007; Sadjadpour, 2014). It was not until the 2008 global financial crisis that Abu Dhabi has been able to enforce a more cohesive foreign policy across the emirates (Almezaini, 2012).

The seven emirates also have contradictory priorities with respect to the Muslim Brotherhood, a critical domestic characteristic that informs policymaking in the UAE. In 1974, with the help of Egyptian, Kuwaiti, and Qatari members; the Muslim Brotherhood was organized in Dubai under the name *Islah* (Freer, 2018). In Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah, *Islah* was quick to gain popularity and attract the support of the upper class, though in Abu Dhabi it was virtually non-existent. Through the support of the northern emirs, leaders of *Islah* rose to high positions in the federal government, gaining cabinet seats in the ministries of justice, education, Islamic affairs, charitable endowments, and labor and social affairs (Ulrichsen, 2017). As membership in *Islah* soared, so did its leverage to petition the government more and more often (Roberts, 2017).

Islah was able to successfully emerge as an alternative node of power that could exert pressure on political decisions. However, Abu Dhabi never had the intention to allow an institutionalized political opposition to consolidate. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the emir of Abu Dhabi and the president of the UAE, did not give any land to *Islah* in which it could establish presence, though he had expressed his desire to do so in the late 1970s (Roberts, 2017a). Abu Dhabi sought to politically integrate the emirates since the UAE was formed in 1971, and considered another source of influence with grassroots support to be detrimental to that end. Over time, Dubai's leadership also

started to develop a distaste for Islah. Dubai had been a market oriented, materialistic entrepôt for a long time and it would not have Islah affect business by agitating Islamic sensibilities such as hotels serving alcoholic drinks (Freer, 2018). It did not help that meanwhile Dubai and Abu Dhabi both struggled with acts of terrorism perpetrated by religious extremists—despite that no link could be found between Islah and the attacks (Al Arabiya, 2015b; Fitchett, 1977; Salem, 2014).

Neither of the two emirates could easily afford at the time to lay siege on Islah. In 1979, all Gulf monarchies came under serious threat from an aggressive revolutionary Iran (Gause, 2009). Beyond having security and geopolitical dimensions, the revolution pitted dynamic, radical Shi'i fervor against stagnant and conservative Sunni establishment in the Gulf. Feeling compelled to demonstrate its religious credentials, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia assumed the title “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” and started sponsoring mujahideen in Afghanistan (Kepel, 2006). Under these circumstances, the UAE leadership also had to emphasize its commitment to Islam, which was achieved by imposing a stricter ban on alcohol in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, and a tacit alliance with Islah (Roberts, 2017a).

By the late 1980s, when the Islamic revolution lost its initial charm, Islah started to find itself under pressure by Abu Dhabi and Dubai. In Dubai, imams were cautioned not to attempt to use their influence for political purposes, while all Friday sermons started to be subjected to compulsory review. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi pressured prominent members of Islah to retire from government positions, and started to promote more quietist religious groups like Sufi orders and Tablighi Jamaat. In 1995, religious extremists with alleged ties with Islah were blamed for attempting to assassinate Husni Mubarak. Prominent foreign members of the Muslim Brotherhood were soon expelled from the UAE, but a crackdown was staved off by Sheikh Saqr bin Mohammed Al

Qasimi, the emir of Ras al-Khaimah. An ardent supporter of Islah, Sheikh Saqr served as a cover for the group against the emirs of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, who wanted Islah to abandon its dormant political aspirations (Freer, 2018).

After the September 11 attacks, Abu Dhabi was convinced that Islah fostered an atmosphere conducive to extremism. With renewed determination, the regime arrested hundreds of Islah sympathizers. Muhammad bin Zayed rose as an important political figure during the crackdown. In 2003, he held talks with Islah to convince the group to abandon its political organization and focus on da‘wah (the act of calling others to embrace Islam). After months of talks, Islah rejected the regime’s demands. Muhammed bin Zayed responded by new aggressive policies to restrict the group’s activities. Islah supporters in the military were isolated, surveilled, and eliminated from the rank and file, before being enrolled in rehabilitation programs. Likewise, many supporters were removed from public offices in 2004 (Wikileaks, 2004).

The long-standing apprehensions of the Abu Dhabi regime were aggravated by the Arab Spring, when groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood started to challenge the undemocratic status quo. The uprisings appeared to confirm that the Brotherhood was more than a simple group of pious missionaries. On the contrary, they were ready to rapidly take power as soon as an opportunity presented itself. The UAE regime put into action a double-sided plan, demonstrating the interaction of internal and external concerns. The Emirati government securitized the issue of Muslim Brotherhood, portraying it as a life-threatening situation that necessitated immediate action and excused measures outside the ordinary limits of political process (see Buzan et al., 1998). After Saqr bin Muhammad died in 2010, the UAE regime initiated a full-blown assault directed at the Muslim Brotherhood, both internally and externally (al-Zo’by & Başkan, 2015). The Muslim Brotherhood and Islah were classified as terrorist

organizations, and more than a hundred members were arrested and sentenced (Katzman, 2021). The purge extended beyond the Muslim Brotherhood; the regime shut down and/or banned several foreign think tanks despite not having any connection with the Brotherhood (Salama, 2012).

It would be worthwhile at this point to shift the attention to the individuals behind these policies, given that their implementation would not have been possible without the transformative impact and decisive position of leaders. Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi is considered to be the founding father of the UAE, having played a principal role in the unification of the seven emirates (Davidson, 2018). In like manner, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum and his son, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum are credited for Dubai's rise to the limelight at a global scale as a cosmopolitan city, and the most diversified economy in the Gulf (Hvidt, 2009; Matly & Dillon, 2007). Mohamed bin Zayed, on the other hand, is widely regarded as the main driving force behind the recent Emirati politics and specifically the securitizing response to the Arab Spring (Davidson, 2006). He has been influential since Sheikh Zayed's death in 2004, when he was appointed as crown prince and became deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces. By 2010, he was already referred to in the media as the de facto ruler of the country (Jones et al., 2015). Though, one year ago, it was assessed by the US foreign service "that he [had] authority in all matters except for final decisions on oil policy and major state expenditures" (Wikileaks, 2009).

Abu Dhabi's long-standing worries over Islah are crystalized in the person of Mohamad bin Zayed. As such, domestic institutions certainly influenced the trajectory and tone of the UAE's relations with Islah. It is no accident that Mohamad bin Zayed's rise to prominence and his inclination to shore up the military has been in parallel with the rising clampdown on Islah. Having graduated from the Royal Military Academy

Sandhurst in the United Kingdom, Mohamad bin Zayed spent much of his career in the army. After being appointed as the chief of staff in 1993, he became one of the chief architects of the UAE's new militarily assertive stance, which led the country to intervene in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Somalia (Hellyer, 2001). Under his de facto leadership, defense expenditure surged to unprecedented levels. While expenditure had been stagnating below \$6 billion for the four years preceding him, it climbed by an average of 12% each year after he assumed duty (SIPRI, 2021). He oversaw the shift of the UAE from being an insignificant military force to one with a capability to project power, challenging preconceived notions about the military potential of a Gulf monarchy (Gause, 2015). Mohammad bin Zayed's eagerness to resort to force in order to deal with regional security issues was also reflected in the unusually aggressive 2015 intervention in Yemen (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016).

The vigorous response of the UAE to Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood was ultimately caused by an interplay of domestic political institutions and personal agency of key individuals, in which the former set the terms of the relationship on top of which the latter informed the particular decisions. Islah was able to inject itself in the government due to the political structure of the UAE. To the dismay of leaderships in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the social base of the movement continually grew with protection and patronage of the smaller Emirates. The subsequent unwillingness of the group to give up its political organization despite Abu Dhabi's pressure was interpreted as a signal of its ulterior motives. Tensions were ratcheted up by allegations about Islah involvement in the attempted assassination of Mubarak, the role of two Emiratis in the September 11 attacks, and finally the Arab Spring, all of which served to toughen the stance of ruling elites in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Ultimately, the Muslim Brotherhood's democratic rise to power across the region drew a furious response from Muhammad

bin Zayed, the de facto ruler of the UAE. Just as Mohammed bin Rashid of Dubai is known for his commercially focused approach to governance, or Hamad bin Jasim of Qatar prioritized investment and diplomacy, Mohammed bin Zayed—who spent most of his career in the army—emphasized the role of military. In other words, the belligerent attitude of the UAE during the Arab Spring was in part a reflection of its ruler’s militant mindset.

Qatar

Contrary to the federal structure of the UAE, there is a unitary system in Qatar. As oil revenues started to rise in the 1950s, Qatari society underwent a certain degree of stratification (Crystal, 1990). However, despite the privileged position of the ruling Al Thani family and a narrow circle of elites with access to politics, the gap between citizens of Qatar has never been as acute as in the UAE. This is in part due to the fact that Qatari citizens total less than a third of the UAE, simplifying distribution of wealth and maintenance of an extensive welfare system (Roberts, 2017a). In addition, the massive imbalance of income between the emirates does not apply to Qatar. The federal structure of the Emirates means that there is more than one source of power, which waters down Abu Dhabi’s federal authority. This also is not the case in Qatar, where the Emir rules unrivaled. While the ruling family historically acted as a check on the power of the Emir, starting from Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad, source of political legitimacy started to rely less heavily on tribal relations (Kamrava, 2009).

As the state grew in the latter half of the 20th century, Qatar increasingly found itself in need of human capital (Roberts, 2017b). Under such conditions, members of the Qatari Islah offered a valuable source of skills and contacts. Muslim Brotherhood members dispersing before the scourge of Nasser started settling in Qatar during the 1950s, and as was the case in the other Gulf monarchies which welcomed them, they

were heavily employed in the Ministry of Education, where they would have a profound formative impact (Roberts, 2014). When the Arab Spring erupted, affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood also served as vital channels of arms, money, and other support to groups on the ground (Dagher et al., 2011). Islah had little motivation and limited opportunities for influencing policy in Qatar, where socioeconomic inequality was a much less prevalent theme than elsewhere in the Gulf. Also, religious scholars in Qatar did not emerge as an organized social group. Until 1993, there was not even a ministry of religious affairs in the country. There was a tacit agreement between the Qatari government and the group of exiled individuals who took shelter in the country: as long as they avoided inciting public agitation against the regime, they would be allowed to remain in Doha, advance their missions, and even receive state support. By respecting these simple terms, the sides were to enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship for the years to come. Indeed, Qatari Islah voted for dissolving itself in 1999, citing that a fixed organization was unnecessary in the societal context of Qatar (Al-Turabi & Al-Mubarak, 2013).

On the whole, in contrast with the Emirati experience, Qatar's domestic institutional dynamics gave its leadership little reason to worry about the Muslim Brotherhood. However, this is not sufficient on its own to explain the risky decision of Qatar to support the Muslim Brotherhood and a host of other actors associated with it and/or its cause. As with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the tone with which a subject is approached is set by domestic institutions, but the particular direction and limitations of the resulting decisions are dictated by personal attributes of top policymakers.

As with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar's contemporary history demonstrates the critical impact of leaders on establishing and changing state policy, notably during the power transitions of 1972 and 1995, which resulted in significant shifts in the

orientation of the state (Gause, 2015; Peterson, 2001; Roberts, 2016). Examination of Qatar's recent foreign policy necessarily highlights the role of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa as its architect, just as in the UAE, it is the influence of Muhammad bin Zayid. According to Kamrava (2014), Hamad bin Khalifa kept a key personal role in the creation of Qatar's foreign policy inasmuch as it "reflected the personal preferences and agendas of the ruler."

Similar to Muhammad bin Zayid, Emir Hamad received military education in Sandhurst, from which he graduated in 1971, and held the position of Defense Minister for 36 years. Unlike Muhammad bin Zayid, however, he did not really pay special attention to the military in terms of a political instrument or a top priority development goal. While there are not many figures on Qatar's defense expenditure during Emir Hamad's reign—mostly consisting of lists of armament prepared by third-parties, one can see from these that in comparison to the Emirates, Qatar's military arsenal was limited ("Chapter Seven," 2015; Cordesman, 1997). Some of these data are indicating that Qatar's per capita military spending in the 1990s was very high. However, Roberts (2017a) argues that such figures can be misleading as "they reflect the small size of the Qatari economy and occasional large military purchases (i.e., French Mirage jets) that, in context, are noticeable precisely by their rarity" (p. 559). Tamim bin Hamad's increasing influence as the then crown prince correlates with a surge in defense expenditure from the late 2000s onwards. In a leaked diplomatic cable dated 2006, Americans described Tamim bin Hamad as the man behind defense and intelligence issues (Wikileaks, 2006). Years later, this was also confirmed by his father Hamad bin Khalifa in an interview (Dickson & Khalaf, 2010).

Hamad bin Khalifa's security policy prioritized increasing areas of mutual interest with diverse powers, rather than dedicating more and more of the state's income

for arming and training the armed forces (Roberts, 2017c). He strived to render Qatar a valuable ally for each of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. For China, as a key supplier of natural gas and oil; for Russia, through the establishment of Gas Exporting Countries Forum as a gas analogue of OPEC; for France and the United Kingdom, through military contracts and as a major foreign investor; and finally for the United States, through the Al Udeid air base—the largest American military installation in the MENA region. Apart from these states, thanks to its abundant hydrocarbon reserves, Qatar became an important partner for Japan, South Korea, and India. When it comes to nonstate actors, Qatar showed an interest in improving relations with notable Islamist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Taliban. Finally, it should be noted that during Hamad bin Khalifa's rule, Qatar cultivated ties with both parties in the Hamas-Israel, and Iran-US relations (Roberts, 2017b). The primary motivation behind these policies was to make Qatar a significant actor for every actor significant for itself—around the world, and in particular the MENA region. Considerable progress was made to this end, and most importantly, as noted by Ulrichsen (2014b), Qatar's transition from being a relatively obscure small state to an influential and significant regional actor was achieved through peaceful means.

Once the Arab Spring started, Qatar surprised the world by revealing at least three things. First, it had gone a long way in terms of projecting power. Qatar now had a sense of security which allowed it to pursue a more assertive foreign policy. Hamad bin Khalifa's foreign policy was paying off. Cocooned in international alliances and hosting a military base vital for the US, Qatar could afford to send most of its aircraft to Libya, thousands of miles away, without much security concern. Second, it was willing to use its influence even if it meant abandoning its former commitment to being on good terms with as many parties as possible. In defiance of its GCC partners, it

supported a wide array of loosely categorized Islamic movements and groups in the MENA region, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots and affiliates (Gerges, 2011). Thirdly, it could afford and had every intent to follow the ironic—and ostensibly suicidal—policy of siding with freedom and democracy. Domestic conditions of Qatar played an important role on this last one. Qatar started to export gas in 1997, and since then, the living standards of its citizens became one of the highest in the world. Polls conducted among Qatari citizens during the Arab Spring revealed that they were not dissatisfied with their non-democratic regime (Gengler, 2011).

Well secured with its alliances and reassured by a politically quiet society, government of Qatar became bolder. Hamad bin Khalifa strived for enhancing Qatar's regional and global significance by building external alliances. With the rising prospects of the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent to regional prominence, he took more risks than Qatar's rulers ever did. To put it another way, one can argue that both Qatar's security—which resulted from internal stability and international relations, and the assertive policies it adopted during the Arab Spring arose from the aspirations of Hamad bin Khalifa and his ruling elite.

Conclusion

This section revealed that the divergent responses of Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to the Arab Spring were not rooted in a great “Shi‘i-Sunni” schism. While Saudi and Emirati regimes helped foster sectarianism by instrumentalizing identity politics for the interventions in Yemen and Syria, (omni)balancing against domestic actors that were perceived to present a challenge to their rule has evidently weighed heavier in their agendas, even though these actors were meant to be allies based on sectarian criteria. Riyadh refrained from sponsoring Sunni groups in Syria because chief policymakers in Saudi Arabia felt domestically challenged by the political concerns of

the Muslim Brotherhood and the al-Sahwa movement. Likewise, although Abu Dhabi mostly favored secular or anti-Islamist groups over Islamist ones in Libya, the regime cooperated with Salafist militants in Yemen on the basis that the latter were more inclined to abide by the Emirati vision of governance (Abdul-Ahad, 2018). Overall, the fact that Saudi Arabia and the UAE shifted their positions for increasingly factionalized Islamist groups in Syria, Yemen, and Libya indicates that they consider political interests more consequential than adherence to a particular sect or religious doctrine.

By contrast, Qatar took advantage of its sense of domestic security based on the absence of a vocal opposition, and its history of building successful external relations to support democratic revolutions in Syria, Libya and Egypt. The role of sectarian considerations in motivating these policies was meager: the religious orientations of the different regimes against which Qatar supported various Islamist groups were hardly unified (Gaub, 2015). On the contrary, the decisionmakers proceeded on the assumption that the regional ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood would provide a suitable ground for extending Qatari soft-power, even if, eventually, such a possibility appeared to be diminishing.

The responses of each Gulf monarchy to the Arab Spring relied heavily on the individual views, calculations, and personalities of key members of their royal families and their advisors, however insightful or improvident. To the extent that they can be accounted for, these responses are not irrational. However, they certainly differ from how classical theories of International Relations would predict “the state as a rational actor” to behave in the international sphere. On certain occasions, the three Gulf monarchies have conducted their foreign policies less like nation states engaged in a regional powerplay, and more like rich families competing with each other. Their inability to resolve—or at least manage—disputes among them also prevented the three

Gulf regimes from being effective in dealing with the regional conflicts. On the contrary, the race engaged in by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to increase their regional influence accelerated the devolution of the Arab Spring into a set of proxy wars where the initial motivation underlying the uprisings—political, civil, and economic rights—were forgotten in the midst of bloody conflicts.

While scholars specializing in the MENA region are quite familiar with the idea of integrating state-level factors into models of international alliances, there have not been many attempts to map the evolving internal dynamics that affect different courses of action. Observing that a state which suffers from internal social rifts may still be able to project considerable power (whether military or otherwise) in the regional sphere, Gause (2014) argues that “it is important to distinguish between state weakness in the domestic political arena and weakness in international power rankings” (p. 8). Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are not wrought by societal cleavages, but their regimes do not provide for a mechanism whereby discontent can be publicly expressed and incorporated into the political process. Instead, they still rely on fragile rentier bargains to waylay popular dissent, and these bargains similarly characterize how they can be expected to behave in the international sphere.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This thesis investigated the Arab Spring for a causal relationship between the regional interventions of the Gulf monarchies and the rise of Islamic sectarianism in the MENA region. What has come to light after this investigation is that concerns of regime survival and/or regional influence are more adequate than Islamic sectarianism in explaining the divergent interventionist policies by which the Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari regimes reacted to the Arab Spring. However, despite that regimes’ considerations were related to furthering of domestic or regional interests, the

interventions contributed to the rise of Islamic sectarianism. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this allowed the regime to declare the enemy within, prevent activists of different sects from forming a united front by concealing networks of inter-sectarian cooperation, establish the limits of political inclusion and exclusion, and excuse domestic sectarian oppression. In the case of the UAE, the Arab Spring served to blatantly expose the true concerns of the regime, which combined its tolerance of the politically quietist Shi'i with extreme intolerance against Sunni political activism. Saudi Arabia's policies against the Muslim Brotherhood converged with the UAE in that both were aimed at taking control of the movement's narrative to disfigure it, and to oppose it as radical Islamic terrorism, destroying the legitimacy of the Sunni democratic movement in both the international and domestic settings. This achievement, and their skillful survival of the Arab Spring, renewed the repressive cycle of autocracy in the MENA region (Hinnebusch, 2014).

The ostensibly sectarian configuration of interventions in the region served to reinforce and amplify the narrative of the Shi'i-Sunni conflict (Spencer, 2014). As discussed in Chapter 3, the first and foremost factor in this was Saudi Arabia's confrontation with Iran. In addition, the Emirates and Qatar may have been less unified than Saudi Arabia in their relations with Iran and with respect to which combination of Sunni, secular, and anti-Islamic actors should be supported, yet neither of them ever openly backed a Shi'i actor. Thirdly, external interventions contributed to the proliferation of sectarian militant groups across the region which perceived, or sought to reframe, the conflicts as a struggle against the un-Islamic and corrupt opposite sect. Therefore, the increased involvement of the three Gulf monarchies in the regional conflicts resulted in what might be termed a power alignment that almost perfectly matched the primordialist narrative which enjoyed popularity in the public discourse.

Although this narrative was promoted domestically by the Saudi and Emirati regimes to justify foreign policies, polarization of the conflicts along Shi‘i-Sunni lines took place against their initial will to avoid sectarian instability in the GCC (Pierret, 2013). The Gulf monarchies intervened in the local conflicts not because they felt that the uprisings or the ways in which they were manipulated by Iran challenged their sectarian identity, but rather because they presented an existential threat against the authoritarian Saudi and Emirati regimes, and conversely, a unique opportunity of enhancing regional position for Qatar.

Explaining the resurgence of Islamic sectarianism during the Arab Spring solely through primordialist or instrumentalist lenses would prevent us from discerning a very elaborate social attempt at self-liberation in a Machiavellian context—a struggle of the people who stood up for greater freedom and political participation—and in the process, deprives the masses of their agency. As demonstrated by this study, a closer look at the divergent responses of the Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari regimes to the Arab Spring would enable us to go beyond these two popular sectarian theories subscribed to by many experts and by the mainstream media. It cannot be denied that within many Arab communities, religious denomination is a significant element of identity. However, sects are neither at the heart of regime’s policies, nor mere instruments created by them. The developments and power configurations hitherto examined expose a more nuanced story better explained in terms of omnibalancing, i.e. the perceived need of the regimes to balance against the reformist and dissident threats or opportunities that emerged during the Arab Spring. The thesis by no means downplays the probability that the sectarian rhetoric developed separate, independent dynamics once triggered; rather, it emphasizes that this could not have taken place as an instance of spontaneous resurgence of ancient hatreds. Therefore, the Arab Spring and its regional repercussions

should not be approached simply as Islamic sectarianism writ large, but perhaps as a model of autocratic survival practice.

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