

The Regional Security Complex in the Persian Gulf: Contours of Iran's GCC Policy

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Abstract

Common perceptions of recent tensions between Iran and the GCC states are couched in terms of a longstanding and historically rooted Shia-Sunni conflict between two major regional powers: Iran and Saudi Arabia. This paper argues that this perspective is simplistic since it ignores the major political drivers of the conflict at regional and international levels. From the perspective of the Regional Security Complex (RSC), the Persian Gulf region has been a typical security subcomplex since the 1970s. After the Iran-Iraq war, Iran adopted a détente policy towards the GCC states taking advantage of a domestic consensus to improve relations with her neighbouring states. The drive gained momentum after the arrival in office of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. However, his GCC policy has faced multiple challenges. The GCC countries have increasingly been suspicious and critical of Iran's growing strength and regional influence. The intensification of the proxy games with Saudi Arabia have accentuated the insecurity of the GCC states. Internationally too, the US tough stance under President Trump and the return of the economic sanctions regime against Iran have raised the political temperatures in the region, making it even harder for Iran and the GCC to improve their relations. We argue that to understand the proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in particular, a more nuanced approach is needed that goes beyond religious strife and rivalry.

Keywords Iran; GCC; détente; Security; Proxy Wars; Sectarian Conflict

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Introduction

According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's seminal work, a Regional Security Complex (RSC) comprises "a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, de-securitisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another."³ This approach defines RSCs "by durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of subglobal, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence." The particular character of a local RSC will thus often be affected by "historical factors such as longstanding enmities (Greeks and Turks, Arabs and Persians, Khmers and Vietnamese), or the common cultural embrace of a civilisational area (Arabs, Europeans, South Asians, Northeast Asians, South Americans)."⁴ Viewed from this perspective, since the British withdrawal in 1971 leading to the independence of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, the states in the Persian Gulf region formed an independent subcomplex due to the high degree of security interdependence: Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq are the three pillars of the Persian Gulf. However, Iraq has been too weak to act as a pillar especially since the invasion in 2003.

With a widening gap between Iran and the Arab states, the region has witnessed growing superpower influence and in particular the US political and military presence has been on the rise. The Gulf States have nevertheless maintained a degree of autonomy, a factor which has in turn enabled Iran to play for political and security space through offers of conciliatory diplomacy towards the GCC. Recent years have witnessed the intensification of such rivalry with Iran-Saudi proxy wars tainting several crises from Yemen to Syria and Libya.

Iran's foreign policy towards the GCC has evolved since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. After early years when revolutionary and ideological fervour were dominant, a

³ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University, 2003, p. 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

more pragmatic phase ushered in especially after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in the late 1980s. Despite the obvious challenges and difficulties, for Iran reconciliation with the Gulf neighbours, has at times moved centre stage of relations with the GCC countries. This has been necessitated by the long and fraught history of relations between the two sides (and especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia), which has been marked by divisions and differences comprising ideological divergences, ethnic/sectarian conflicts, territorial disputes, and a contest for regional hegemony. Aware of the historical and long-term roots of such mutual distrust, Iran has been keen to express its intentions by way of offering to build a collective security mechanism in the Persian Gulf as a way of keeping out external forces.

Iran's policy towards the GCC is mainly based on three considerations: first, it hopes to turn enemies into friends, improving Iran's isolated position and easing the geopolitical security dilemma in the Persian Gulf region; second, it aims to develop trade relations with the Gulf neighbours and promote Iran's economic development; and third, it aims to divide the GCC in its attempt to reduce the American influence in the Persian Gulf and weaken its hostility towards Iran.

The prevailing perception that Iran is the main nemesis to the GCC states or even to the existing Middle East order at large oversimplifies her complex regional position. This paper re-examines the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional and international politics in an historical perspective to shed light on her relations with the GCC neighbours in the period after the Iran-Iraq war. We show that during the Rouhani administration, improving relations with the GCC has been a central plank of Iran's attempts to improve the regional geo-security environment. A number of structural obstacles, however, have compounded the already deep and entrenched historical mistrust between Iran and the GCC, further inflating the strong insecurity of the latter. Iran's growing influence in the Arab region combined with the US anti-Iran policy, has meant that Iran's peace initiatives with the GCC have countered formidable

obstacles and Iran's success in seeking and securing a de-escalation of tensions and a plan to promote peace initiatives with the GCC has not borne fruit.

I Iran's GCC Policy after the Iran-Iraq War

The end of the eight-year war with Iraq presented Iran with an opportunity to pursue peaceful neighbourly relations and to take advantage of a better external environment for economic development. This also led to an opportunity for President Rafsanjani to view the GCC states not as enemies but as potential business partners and “cash-rich investors to entice.”⁵ The first significant sign of Iran's shift to a pragmatic foreign policy was its neutrality during the 1991 Gulf War, when she condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In addition, the policy of exporting revolution was moderated with Iran scaling down its policy of fomenting Shia unrest in the Persian Gulf Arab states. This latter policy had a marked effect on softening the Saudi's attitude towards Iran in this period. By the end of 1991, Saudi Arabia and Iran had restored diplomatic relations with the historic visit to Tehran of the Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. Significantly, he suggested that the two countries could see “a future of positive relations”⁶ during this trip. However, despite this relative thawing of regional relations, the US-Iran relations continued to be tense. This was at least partly due to the Clinton administration's policy of "Dual Containment" towards Iran and Iraq, which placed limitations on further development of relations between Iran and the GCC.

After President Mohammad Khatami took office in 1997, he pushed for a dialogue among civilizations, thus hoping to improve relations with the Gulf States, the United States and the rest of the world. This initiative soon received positive responses from

⁵ Afshin Molavi, “Iran and the Gulf States”, in Robin Wright (ed.), *The Iran Primer*, Washington DC, USIP, 2010, pp. 159-161.

⁶ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey, *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Rand Cooperation, 2009, p. 17; available from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a495436.pdf>; accessed on 20 December, 2018.

Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries. In September 1997, Iran and Saudi Arabia resumed air routes. In December of the same year, Iran became the host of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). At the invitation of Iran, the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah led a delegation to the OIC meeting in Tehran. Prince Abdullah called on the OIC to focus on resolving the problems of the Islamic community and promoting unity.⁷ The detente between the two countries reached a climax in 1998. In February 1998, former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Saudi Arabia for ten days to improve relations between the two countries. Saudi Arabia's King Fahd and Rafsanjani met in Riyadh to discuss regional and bilateral ties and the problem of falling oil prices.⁸ In the first half of 1999, Saudi Foreign Minister and Saudi Defence Minister visited Iran successively, and the two countries even began to discuss the establishment of a common security system.⁹ In 1999, the Iranian President Khatami visited Jiddah. "It is a historic visit, followed by a number of regional and security agreements in 2001 and 2002 covering terrorism, money laundering, drug trafficking and illegal immigration."¹⁰ During the Afghanistan war in 2001, Iran and Saudi Arabia maintained cooperation in jointly fighting al-Qaeda and facilitated the US military presence and operations there.

But friendly relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia ended after 2002. One reason was the revelation of Iran's nuclear facilities in 2002, which led to the outbreak of the Iranian nuclear crisis. Saudi Arabia believed that once Iran had nuclear weapons, it would no longer fear external threats and prevail in its game vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabian Enters the Twenty-first Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic, and Energy Dimensions*, Westport: Praeger, 2003, p. 46.

⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia and Iran", Center for Strategic and International Studies June 2001; available from: http://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/saudi_iran.pdf; accessed 21 December, 2018.

⁹ Rodger Shanahan, "The Gulf States and Iran: Robust Competitors or Interested Bystanders?" Lowy Institute of International Policy, 2009, p. 5.

¹⁰ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, RAND Cooperation, 2009, p. 21.

The other reason was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that toppled the Saddam Hussein regime. The aftermath saw Iraq becoming a sectarian power-sharing state with the Shia majority in power, allowing Iran to fill the power vacuum while the influence of the Saudi in Iraq declined.¹¹ These factors thwarted the earlier rapprochement and led to increased mistrust between Saudi Arabia intensifying their regional rivalries.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Administration represented the return of Iran's foreign policy from pragmatism to revolutionary ideology, but his policy towards the GCC was also pragmatic. In fact, prior to his election, a consensus had emerged among observers of the region that Iran's foreign policy, including its orientation to the GCC states, was progressing rapidly on its long march away from revolutionary politics and taking a turn towards realpolitik and the pragmatic pursuit of narrowly defined national interests.¹²

Ahmadinejad had made new progress with GCC, especially with several small Gulf States. After 2000, some small GCC countries' foreign policy became more independent. Qatar was a clear case preferring to see Iran as a neighbour rather than an adversary. In 2006, Qatar objected to a UN Security Council Resolution requiring Iran to halt uranium enrichment. Qatar's representative said he had not approved of proceeding with the vote when his region was inflamed.¹³ Qatar was also the only country to vote against sanctions on Iran in the UN Security Council. On 3 December 2007, Qatar invited Ahmadinejad to the GCC Summit, where he participated and

¹¹ Guido Steinberg & Nils Woermer, "Exploring Iran & Saudi Arabia's Interests in Afghanistan & Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers - A Zero Sum Game?" CIDOB Policy Research Project, April 2013, p. 8.

¹² Stephanie Cronin, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC States: Revolution to Realpolitik?" Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States, 2011, p. 2.

¹³ United Nations, "Security Council Demands Iran Suspend Uranium Enrichment by 31 August, or Face Possible Economic, Diplomatic Sanctions"; available from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8792.doc.htm>; accessed 25 December, 2018.

called for the establishment of an independent security system in the Gulf.¹⁴ After the Summit, he visited Bahrain, the first Iranian President to do so since the 1979 Revolution. Ahmadinejad struck a deal with Bahrain to supply natural gas, which was a step towards changing Bahrain's hostile attitude towards Iran.¹⁵ Oman was also playing a coordinating role. In 2009, Sultan Qaboos visited Iran, paving the way for his country to act as a mediator between the United States and Iran in later nuclear talks.

Ahmadinejad, whose aim was also to create an independent collective security in the Gulf, seemed to be making some headway on this difficult proposal. In March 2010, Iran signed a Security pact with Qatar to crack down on smuggling, drug crimes and money laundering. Iran was also reported to have reached similar agreements with Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.¹⁶ Although Iran signed bilateral rather than multilateral agreements with these countries, it showed that Iran's relations with the Middle East countries, especially the GCC, sought to downplay confrontation and tried to build a relationship based on mutual trust.

However, Iran's detente with the GCC states did not bear much fruit. At the regional level, Iran's efforts to improve relations with these states contradicted its wider regional expansion. After 2003, mainly because of Iran's presence in Iraq, a geopolitical landscape known as the "Shia Crescent" was emerging, creating a sense of insecurity in the Gulf Arab countries. Most GCC countries have Shia communities, which makes them nervous about Iran's regional ambitions. Since the tumultuous upheavals that shook the Arab countries after 2011, Iran has been deeply involved in the Syrian civil war, and has been accused of involvement in the Shias' uprisings in

¹⁴ Afshin Molavi, "Iran and the Gulf States", in Robin Wright (ed.), *The Iran Primer*, Washington DC, USIP, 2010, p. 66.

¹⁵ Breffni O'Rourke, "Iran: Ahmadinejad's Bahrain Visit New Piece in Complex Pattern", 15 November 2007; <https://www.rferl.org/a/1079134.html>; accessed 18 January 2019.

¹⁶ Mehran Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", in Gawdat Bahgat etc. ed., *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and Its Arab Neighbors*, Macmillan: Plagrave, 2017, p. 176.

Bahrain and the crisis in Yemen. On a global level too, Iran has been subject to severe international and unilateral US sanctions over its nuclear programme since 2002. The Gulf Arab states feared a nuclear-armed Iran and were happy to see it isolated by the international community. These unfavourable factors made Iran's detente policy towards the GCC largely unsuccessful.

II Rouhani Government's GCC Policy and its Consequences

Hassan Rouhani, known as the "diplomatic sheikh" for his moderation and pragmatism, has focused on ending Iran's international isolation by seeking a resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue to "avoid an unwise and unnecessary conflict."¹⁷ After long and arduous negotiations with world powers, Iran finally reached an agreement dubbed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the JCPOA) in July 2015, which was implemented from January 2016.

In the first half of 2014, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs*, comprehensively elaborating the diplomatic policy of Rouhani government to pursue multilateralism, security and cooperation. "The Islamic Republic can actively contribute to the restoration of regional peace, security, and stability and play a catalytic role during this current transitional stage in international relations." He went on: "Iran will also endeavour to diffuse external threats by resolving outstanding issues with the rest of the world, in particular with its immediate neighbours. Confidence building and cooperation will be the cornerstones of Iran's regional policy."¹⁸ In April 2015, Zarif declared that "Good relations with Iran's neighbours are our top priority. Our rationale is that the nuclear issue has been a

¹⁷ Hassan Rohani, "Iran's Nuclear Program: The Way Out", *Time Magazine* 9 May 2006; available from: <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1192435,00.html#ixzz2WVYE5eUU>; accessed 22 September 2019.

¹⁸ Mohammad Javad Zarif, "What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014, p. 4, p. 10.

symptom, not a cause, of mistrust and conflict”.¹⁹

Subsequently, regional security featured as an important consideration in the Rouhani government’s foreign policy. He attached great importance to improving relations with the GCC. Meanwhile, the divisions within GCC allowed Rouhani to continue to improve relations with some small Gulf States. In general, these states are divided into three categories differentiated by their attitude toward Iran: (a) friendly (Oman, Qatar), (b) neutral (Kuwait) and (c) hostile (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE).

1. Prioritising Better Relations with Saudi Arabia

Rouhani was well aware that an inability to improve relations with Saudi Arabia meant a failure for Iran to achieve a breakthrough in her relations with the GCC as a whole. To build trust, Rouhani made clear that his government would pursue a "friendly relationship" with all its neighbours, including the Arab countries and Saudi Arabia, in particular.²⁰ Rouhani also proposed a collective security initiative in the Gulf region.²¹ However this initiative has not received Saudi’s response.

In December 2013, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. In Doha, Zarif expressed his desire to work together with Saudi Arabia for regional stability, stating that the upcoming Iran nuclear deal with world powers would not pose a threat to the Gulf States. “We believe that Iran and Saudi Arabia should work together in order to promote peace and stability in the region.”²²

¹⁹ The New York Times, “Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message From Iran”, 20 April, 2015; available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html>; accessed 22 September 2019.

²⁰ The Guardian, “Iranian president-elect Rouhani promises better relations with west”, 17 June 2013; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/17/iran-hassan-rouhani-promises-moderation>; accessed 28 January 2019.

²¹ Mohammad Javad Zarif, “What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era”, May/June 2014, p. 4.

²² Aljazeera, “Zarif asks Saudi Arabia to work with Iran”, 3 December 2013; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/12/zarif-asks-saudi-arabia-work-with-iran-2013122154323461970.html>; accessed 28 January 2019,

It seemed that initially at least, the Saudis were also willing to negotiate with Iran on issues of mutual interests. In August 2014, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian held talks with the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal in Jeddah. That was the first high-level Iranian visit to the Kingdom since Rouhani took office. They discussed the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, which both nations opposed.²³

Despite these early efforts, the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia did not progress and in fact began to deteriorate after 2015. The main sticky point was Saudi Arabia's concern about the prospect of Iran's imminent nuclear deal with the world powers. At the same time, relations between the two countries were tainted by proxy battles in the region and disagreements to do with OPEC's over production caused by falling oil prices. To complicate things further, more than 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed in a stampede during the Hajj in Mecca in September 2015. Iran strongly questioned the Saudi government's organisational ability as well as its standing as the guardian and host of the two holy sites. In late December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of an Islamic counter-terrorism coalition, which included 34 Muslim countries without Iran. In addition to fighting the IS, the coalition's main aim was to fight Iranian-led Shia "terrorism".²⁴ To make things worse, tensions between the two countries escalated over the Saudi execution of Nimr, a Shia cleric. Saudi government accused Nimr of being a "terrorist", but it was widely suspected that he was targeted because he had led a Shia anti-government movement in Saudi's eastern provinces after 2011. Following Nimr's execution, Iranian demonstrators stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran leading to the Saudi Arabian government announcing cutting ties with Iran, an act that was soon followed by Bahrain.

²³ VOA news, "Iranian Minister: Saudi Talks 'Constructive'", 26 August 2014; available from: <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/iranian-minister-saudi-talks-constructive>; accessed 22 September 2019.

²⁴ Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, "Why Saudis formed anti-terror coalition", December 22 2015; <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/why-saudis-formed-anti-terror-coalition>; accessed February 4, 2019.

Iran and Saudi Arabia still had some cooperation in 2016 even though their diplomatic relations had broken off. In November and following the nuclear deal, Iran struck a deal with the oil-exporting countries within OPEC which included Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, Iran was allowed to increase production while others cut theirs to varying degrees. In 2016, Saudi Arabia invited Iranian officials to talk about resuming the Hajj pilgrimage for Iranian citizens, and Iran agreed to resume the pilgrimage to Mecca from 2017.²⁵ However, after Trump took office, Saudi Arabia's regional policy became more aggressive with the proxy games with Iran intensifying at the regional level. The Qatar crisis in June 2017 and the blockade imposed by the quartet (consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) reflected above all Saudi Arabia's dissatisfaction with Qatar's continued relations with Iran. With Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Salman fortifying his grip in power, Saudi hostility to Iran has assumed new proportions. The destructive and unexpected drone attacks on the Aramco oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais on 14 September 2019 raised the conflict to new heights with the Saudis' openly accusing Iran of having masterminded the attack which disrupted half of their oil production. Rouhani's intentions to improve relations with the Saudis has thus paled beyond recognition.

2. Interactions with the Small Gulf States

In the GCC, three countries are generally friendly to Iran. In Oman, Sultan Qaboos sees no inconsistency between Oman's alliance with the United States and his friendship with Iran.²⁶ Mainly unhappy with the Saudi hegemony, Oman looks to Iran for common management of the Strait of Hormuz and economic development.

²⁵ The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, "Is an Iranian-Gulf Arab Rapprochement in the Works?" 2 February 2017; <https://agsiw.org/iranian-gulf-arab-rapprochement-works/>; accessed 3 February 2019.

²⁶ Kenneth Katzman, "Oman, Reform, Security and U.S. Policy", Congressional Research Service, 13 April, 2011, p. 11; available from: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=zh-CN&lr=&id=jCXhJ4itId0C&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Iran+Oman&ots=dNxykEFadx&sig=grT3xEatiMmUUPO9CxzGLr18-1E&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Iran%20Oman&f=true; accessed 23 January 2019.

After the Arab Spring, Qatar's opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and its support for Saudi Arabia's military crackdown on Bahrain's Shi'ite population led to an estrangement with Iran.²⁷ But Qatar's approach to Iran is markedly different from Saudi Arabia's, arguing for closer ties with Tehran. Kuwait has been long concerned with Iran's expansion in Iraq because of its own Shi'ite problems. It has repeatedly accused Iran of fomenting Shi'ite unrest in its country. But Kuwait's attitude toward Iran is also moderate and both countries have maintained normal diplomatic relations with each other.

More broadly, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE were all interested in Rouhani's peace initiative. Oman was also the first GCC country to have a head of state visit Iran.²⁸ Rouhani visited Oman and Kuwait in March 2014, his first trip to the GCC states since taking office.²⁹ On 01 June 2014, the Amir of Kuwait visited Tehran at the invitation of the Iranian President. During the visit, he met with the Supreme Leader Khamenei and said that Kuwait was ready to turn a new leaf in relations between the two countries.³⁰

In 2014, Qatar and Tehran agreed to further expand trade and announced the planned creation of three free trade zones in the Iranian port of Bushehr and the Qatari ports of Doha and Al Ruwais.³¹ After the signing of JCPOA, the then Qatari Foreign Minister

²⁷ Mehran Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", in Gawdat Bahgat et al. (ed.), *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and Its Arab Neighbors*, Macmillan: Plagrave, 2017, p. 176.

²⁸ Reuters, "Oman's Qaboos on Tehran visit, U.S.-Iran mediation in focus", 25 August 2013; available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-oman-idUSBRE97O06820130825>; , accessed 28 January 2019.

²⁹ *Financial Times*, "Iran's Hassan Rouhani seals gas deal during visit to Oman", 14 March 2014; available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/8bdf1daa-aaba-11e3-bc01-00144feab7de>; accessed 30 January, 2019.

³⁰ Khaled Abdulaziz Alsalloum & Mohamed Salman Tayie, "The Present and Future of Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations and Their Influence on the Security of the Arabian Gulf", *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2018, pp. 102-111.

³¹ Azernews, "Iran, Qatar to set up joint free trade zone", 7 July 2014; available from: <https://www.azernews.az/region/68639.html>; accessed 30 January 2019.

Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah said: “This was the best option among other options — to come up with a solution. . . through dialogue... We are confident that all the efforts that have been exerted make this region very secure, very stable.”³²

Although the UAE has followed Saudi Arabia in regional rivalries such as Syria, Bahrain and Yemen and has territorial disputes with Iran, it also responded positively to Rouhani’s peace initiative at the beginning. The UAE thought this might be a good timing to negotiate with Iran over the ownership of the three islands. On 28 November 2013, the UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayid al-Nuhayyan visited Tehran and obtained an agreement from Iran to begin bilateral discussions on the status of Abu Musa island. Iran also reportedly began reducing its presence on the island. On 4 December 2013, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited the UAE and invited the UAE leadership to visit Iran.³³ However, a visit by the UAE’s head of state to Iran has not materialised. The deep-rooted distrust between Iran and the UAE has continued to hamper any substantial improvements in their relations ever since.

In fact, before the election of President Trump in 2016, the Gulf Arab states and Iran had reportedly explored the possibility of starting a dialogue concerning Persian Gulf security. The Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif had repeatedly highlighted the need for such a dialogue.³⁴ Zarif declared the purview of Iranian constructive engagement extended far beyond nuclear negotiations.”³⁵

³² The Washington Post, “On Kerry visit, Arab nations express support for Iran nuclear agreement”, 3 August 2015; available from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/on-kerry-visit-arab-nations-express-support-for-iran-nuclear-agreement/2015/08/03/36bbebea-36d3-11e5-ab7b-6416d97c73c2_story.html?utm_term=.7151227c4b69; accessed 30 January 2019.

³³ Kenneth Katzman, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy”, CRS Report, 23 March, 2015; available from: https://www.everysreport.com/files/20150323_RS21852_d2c08cb0df68b7d512ab2db8edc5876e38b2af11.pdf; accessed 3 February 2019.

³⁴ SIPRI, “Dissecting international concerns about Iran’s missiles”, 15 November, 2018; available from: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2018/dissecting-international-concerns-about-irans-missiles>; accessed 3 February 2019.

³⁵ The New York Times, “Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran”, 20 April 2015; available

After Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, Rouhani's GCC policy changed from seeking comprehensive improvement to selective breakthrough. Oman and Qatar still maintained friendly relations with Iran, and the UAE adopted a reserved position on the severance of diplomatic relations between Saudi and Iran. Dubai still remains Iran's main trading partner, and the trade between the UAE and Iran soared in 2015-2017 as Iranian economic development led to a surge in imports after the sanctions were lifted.³⁶

Rouhani also sought to deal with the standoff with Saudi Arabia through mediation by smaller Gulf States. In January 2017, Rouhani said that "countries including Kuwait had offered to mediate in the escalating feud between Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia".³⁷ Soon Kuwait's Foreign Minister made a visit to Tehran to deliver a message to President Hassan Rouhani on the "basis of dialogue" between Gulf Arab states and Iran.³⁸ The visit had encouraged Rouhani to try again to improve relations with the GCC countries. On 15 February 2017, Rouhani visited Oman and Kuwait, hoping to strengthen economic and security cooperation.³⁹ However, Rouhani's visit, while improving relations with Oman and Kuwait, meant little to the rest of the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. After the Qatar Blockade in June 2017, Iran's relations with Qatar became even closer but relations with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE deteriorated in equal measure. Rouhani government's efforts to improve relations with all of the GCC countries has all but failed. Recent developments in the Persian Gulf leading to insecurity of oil tankers and the unexpected and unprovoked attack on

from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html>; accessed 3 February 2019.

³⁶ IMF, "Direction of Trade Statistics"; available from: <http://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85&sId=1514498277103>; accessed February 3 2019.

³⁷ Reuters, "Kuwait to deliver message to Iran on dialogue with Gulf Arab states", 25 January 2017; available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-kuwait/kuwait-to-deliver-message-to-iran-on-dialogue-with-gulf-arab-states-idUSKBN1582GE>; accessed 3 February 2019.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ The National, "Rouhani meets rulers of Oman and Kuwait to reduce Iran-GCC tensions", 15 Feb 2017; available from: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/rouhani-meets-rulers-of-oman-and-kuwait-to-reduce-iran-gcc-tensions-1.52558>; accessed 3 February 2019.

Saudi's oil installation in the East, although claimed by Yemen's Houthis and flatly rejected by Iran, has further widened the diplomatic gulf between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰

III The "Rise of Iran" and Increasing Distrust with the GCC

Far from improving relations with the GCC, the Rouhani years have in fact witnessed increased distrust on both sides with only a few small countries willing to maintain orderly relations with Iran. Thus, the longstanding and deep distrust between Iran and the GCC countries has proven difficult to overcome. The Gulf Arab states have been trying to "arabise" the Gulf, while Shia Iran with her Persian majority is portrayed as part of *the other*. Iran, meanwhile, seems set to pursue its policy of regional expansion in the Arab world: "The state identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which considers itself the leader of the anti-hegemonic movement in the Islamic world, is a significant variable in analysing its foreign policy behaviour."⁴¹

1. The JCPOA and its Regional Ramifications

Significantly, the signing of the JCPOA was interpreted by the Saudis and their GCC allies as a threat, envisaging it as potentially emboldening Iran to pursue an even more aggressive policy in the region.⁴² This is why since President Trump unilaterally withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal on 8 May 2018, the Saudis and their allies (mainly the UAE and Bahrain) have seen the move as a decisive opportunity for checking Iran's growing influence and strategic expansion. This has created a rare convergence of interest with Israel which consistently and vociferously opposed President Obama's

⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, "Saudi oil attack: All the latest updates", 27 Sept, 2019, available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/saudi-oil-attacks-latest-updates-190916102800973.html>, accessed 30 Sept. 2019.

⁴¹ Rouzbeh Parsi and John Rydqvist, "Iran and the West: Regional Interests and Global Controversies", FOI report, the Asian Security Studies Program, March 2011, p. 54; available from: <https://www.foi.se/report-summary?reportNo=FOI-R--3168--SE>; accessed 3 February 2019.

⁴² Sezgin Kaya, Zeynep Şartepe, "Contentious Politics in Iran: Factions, Foreign Policy and the Nuclear Deal", Vol. 14, No. 3, Fall 2015, *Alternative Turkish Journal of International Relations*, p. 7.

policy of engagement with Iran.⁴³

What worried Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries was essentially the rapid rise of Iran's power. After the lifting of sanctions, Iran's international status improved, especially its economy began to grow and recession came to an end. Against the background of heightened expectations from the benefits of the nuclear deal, the Iranian economy started on a path of recovery, which enabled inflation to be curbed stabilising the value of the Real. According to Iran's Central Bank data, the inflation rate fell from a peak of 34.7% in 2013/14 to 9% in 2016/17, the first time since the 1979 Revolution when inflation was brought down to single digits.⁴⁴ By 2016/17, Iran's economy had grown out of stagflation and attained a growth rate of 12.5%.⁴⁵

Parallel with improving the economy, the government moved swiftly to improve relations with the world's major powers, with the exception of the US. In the immediate aftermath of the deal being signed, there was great interest in developing economic relations with Iran. In August 2015, Iran and Italy signed an agreement to resume trade in the oil, gas and petrochemical sectors. Subsequently, high level ministerial and trade delegations from Spain, Australia, the UK, France, Germany, New Zealand and other countries visited Iran to explore opportunities for trade and investment. Oil and gas majors, too, such as Total, Lukoil, Rosneft, Eni, Sinopec, Statoil, Petrobras, Royal Dutch Shell and BP, visited Iran in 2015/6 in search of cooperation opportunities.⁴⁶ In January 2016, President Rouhani visited Italy and France and signed several huge contracts. In addition, Asian and African countries

⁴³ Thomas Juneau, "Iran under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter 2014, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Central Bank of Iran, "Annual Inflation and CPI"; available from: https://www.cbi.ir/Inflation/Inflation_en.aspx; accessed 3 February 2019.

⁴⁵ Central Bank of Iran, "Annual Review", 1395, p. 1; available from: https://www.cbi.ir/simplelist/AnnualReview_en.aspx; accessed 3 February 2019.

⁴⁶ Islamic Republic News Agency, "2015 Energy Recap"; available from: <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81900905/>; accessed 3 February 2019.

such as China, India, South Korea and South Africa were also actively exploring the Iranian market. Rouhani's multilateral diplomacy began to make an immediate impact by improving Iran's international image and easing its chronic isolation.

It is arguable that re-engaging Iran could lead to greater economic prosperity at home, hence paving the way to greater domestic and regional stability. Saudi Arabia's and her allies, however, took a different view. Although Iran's potential nuclear capability threat had been reduced, the lifting of sanctions could now give her an upper hand at the regional level and could put Saudi Arabia in a more unfavourable position. The Official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) put on a positive or neutral public face to the declaration: "a final deal would pave the way for Middle East and the Arabian Gulf region free of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons."⁴⁷ In fact reality, however, the Saudis were very unhappy with the deal. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, a former Ambassador to Washington and still an influential public figure, summed up the official sentiment by stating that the nuclear deal "will wreak havoc in the Middle East, a region already plagued by major conflicts".⁴⁸

For Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, the continual "rise of Iran" presents itself as an ongoing "nightmare". The regional collective security mechanism advocated by Rouhani is generally perceived as a masterplan for regional hegemony, thwarting any possibility or desire for the GCC to cooperate with Iran. On the contrary, curbing Iran's sustained rise in what has been widely described as the "Shia Crescent" has become a major goal for these countries. But what has widely and popularly been characterised as an historically rooted religious and sectarian conflict in reality masks a political and strategic drive for regional hegemony – that is a politically driven play

⁴⁷ Reuters, "Saudi Arabia welcomes Iran nuclear deal, seeks region free of WMD: statement"; 6 April 2015; available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-saudi-idUSKBN0MX0PO20150406>; accessed 5 February 2019.

⁴⁸ *Al Arabia*, "Saudi prince: Iran deal worse than the one with N. Korea", 14 July 2015; available from: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/07/16/Saudi-Prince-Bandar-Iran-deal-worse-than-North-Korean-deal-.html>; accessed 5 February, 2019.

for power.

2. Iran's Growing Footprint in the Arab World

In parallel to seeking improved relations with the GCC, Iran under Rouhani has also continued its expansionary policy as the main way to consolidate its regional presence and to counter its international isolation. Such policy has generally served Iran's hardliners at home too. Nowhere has this policy been more evident than in Syria and the Syrian conflict, where Iran has invested a huge amount both in financial and military terms since 2011, when the popular uprising against the Assad regime began. This was because Iran perceived his downfall a huge strategic loss, with adverse consequences for Hezbollah in Lebanon. Despite serious economic difficulties at home during the unilateral US and EU sanctions era (2010-15), according to Western intelligence sources, Tehran is estimated to have spent \$15–\$19bn on direct support to the Assad regime between 2011 and 2014.⁴⁹ With significant assistance from Hezbollah, Iran has also recruited, trained, armed, and deployed Shia militias from Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan for direct deployment in Syria. Though nominally under the command of the Syrian regime, in practice most are heavily influenced by IRGC officers.⁵⁰ In September 2015, Russia sent troops directly to support Assad's government forces, shifting the battlefield in favour of Assad. The Rouhani government has taken advantage of the situation by stepping up its support for Assad. Since January 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have dominated the Astana process of peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition, further strengthening Iran's voice on the Syrian issue. The preservation of the Assad regime has allowed Iran to extend its influence from Iraq to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. This has stoked fear among the Gulf States of a "Shia Crescent" continually and successfully

⁴⁹ Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", *Survival*, Vol. 56, Issue 6, 2014, p. 53.

⁵⁰ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's costly intervention in Syria: A pyrrhic victory", *Mediterranean Politics*, 30 May 2018(online), p. 6; available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629395.2018.1479362>; accessed 7 February 2019.

expanding in the Middle East.

Yemen is an even bigger Saudi concern. Despite huge costs incurred and a ruthless bombing campaign, the situation has been anything but success for the Saudis. In March 2015, a coalition of 10 Arabian countries led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent troops to Yemen to fight against Shia Houthi forces, while the United States sent advisers and logistical guidance.⁵¹ But the well-armed Saudi-led coalition has had little success in Yemen's rugged terrain. Since 2015, the Saudis began to blame Iran's support for the Houthis, emphasising that this was the main external reason why the Houthis could not be defeated.⁵² The Houthis are also widely believed by the United States and the west to be backed by Iran, as John Kerry, the US secretary of state, forcefully put it in 2015: "There are obviously supplies that have been coming from Iran. There are a number of flights every single week that have been flying in."⁵³ Yet evidence in support of such outright claims has been thin on the ground if not absent altogether. Doubt has, for instance, been expressed in a detailed critical analysis by Elisabeth Kendall, which has subjected Iran's alleged involvement in Yemen and the extent of her supposed logistical support for the Houthis to detailed examination.⁵⁴ This alternative perspective recognises that Yemen does not in fact pose a strategic or core interest for Iran. Thus, some observers believe that Iranian support for the Houthis is marginal and does not shape their decision making as much as local alliances and conflict dynamics do.⁵⁵ Despite this, the Yemeni conflict has continued

⁵¹ New York Times, "Saudi Arabia Leads Air Assault in Yemen", 25 March 2015; available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/world/middleeast/al-anad-air-base-houthis-yemen.html>; accessed 7 February 2019.

⁵² Thomas Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment" *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, Issue. 3, May 2016, pp. 647–663.

⁵³ The New York Times, "Kerry Says U.S. Knew of Iran's Military Aid to Houthi Rebels", 9 April 2015; available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/world/middleeast/kerry-us-iran-military-aid-houthi-yemen.html>; accessed 27 September 2019.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Kendall, "Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined? Atlantic Council, Issue Brief, October 2017; available from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/iran-s-fingerprints-in-yemen-real-or-imagined/>; accessed 27 September 2019.

⁵⁵ Mareike Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14

to taint the tense relations between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia especially in light of increased direct drone attacks on the Saudi targets. They inevitably accuse Iran of providing logistical and material support as well training and technology for such attacks.

Meanwhile, the proxy game between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon has also intensified. In November 2017, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri abruptly resigned during a visit to Saudi Arabia, which Iran saw as a premeditated attempt by Saudi Arabia's new Crown Prince Salman to weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran said the surprising resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri was part of a plot to stoke tensions in the region.⁵⁶ At the same time, conflicts between the two countries have raged in other areas such as over Iraq and Palestine.

In general, after the signing of JCPOA, Riyadh has felt threatened and targeted by the growing Iranian interference in its traditional spheres of influence and has felt that without a fundamental change in Iranian policies, there can be no scope for dialogue or improvement in relations.⁵⁷

3. Obama to Trump: The Regional Fallout from the US Iran Policy

Both the process leading the signing of the JCPOA and its aftermath reflected the GCC concerns and conflict with Iran as a regional power. On the eve of the agreement being signed, the Obama administration held talks with the GCC leaders at Camp David on May 2015 in order to ease their concerns. This led to the Obama Administration making announcing a commitment to a US-GCC strategic partnership to build closer relations in all fields, including defence and security cooperation, and

February 2017; available from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988>; , accessed 8 February 2019.

⁵⁶ BBC News, "Lebanon Hariri resignation a plot to stoke tension, says Iran", 5 November, 2017; available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41874488>; accessed 8 February 2019.

⁵⁷ A. K. Pasha, "Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Nuclear Deal", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 3(4), pp. 387–404; p. 388 and p. 393.

developing collective approaches to regional issues.”⁵⁸ The United States also took this opportunity to sell a large quantity of weapons to the GCC countries. This led to some observers to remark that the conference was “not diplomacy, it’s an arms fair.”⁵⁹ King Salman’s personal visit to Washington in September 2015 was a testament to the Saudi anxiety over Iran’s rising influence in the region. The US and Saudi affirmed the need to continue efforts to maintain security, prosperity and stability in the region and in particular to counter Iran’s destabilising activities.⁶⁰

But increased security cooperation between the United States and the GCC in turn spurred Iran’s regional expansion and missile programme fuelling a new round in their “spiral of hostility”. After the JCPOA, there has been a noticeable increase in the testing activities of Iran’s ballistic missile programme. “The decision by negotiators of JCPOA to limit the agreement to covering capabilities for *producing* nuclear warheads, and not to cover the means of *delivering* such weapons, is one of the major criticisms levelled against the deal.”⁶¹ However, a week after the deal was signed, the United Nations Security Council approved Resolution 2231 to make up for this “deficiency”: “Iran is called upon not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology.”⁶² But Iran insists its development of missiles is “defensive” and considers it as “non-negotiable”. In October 2015, Obama

⁵⁸ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement”, 14 May 2015; available from: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>; accessed 5 February 2019.

⁵⁹ FP News, “It’s Not Diplomacy, It’s an Arms Fair”, 14 May 2015; available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/14/obama-arms-fair-camp-david-weapons-sales-gcc/>; accessed 3 February 2019.

⁶⁰ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Joint Statement on the Meeting between President Barack Obama and King Salman bin Abd alAziz Al Saud”, 4 September 2015; available from: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/04/joint-statement-meeting-between-president-barack-obama-and-king-salman>; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁶¹ Mark Fitzpatrick, “Uncertain future: The JCPOA and Iran’s nuclear and missile programmes”, *Adelphi Series*, Volume 57, Issue 466-467, 2017, 89-130, p. 89.

⁶² UNSCR2231, p. 99; available from: [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2231\(2015\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2231(2015)); accessed 28 September 2019.

administration tried to reimpose sanctions after Iran conducted a missile test.⁶³ Obama had hoped that the nuclear deal would reunite Iran with the international community, eventually abandoning its policy of regional expansion and confrontation with the United States, and balance Shia and Sunni forces in the Middle East.⁶⁴ However, in 2016, the Obama Administration officials and US reports stated that there had been little, if any, alteration of Iran's national security policies.⁶⁵

Trump has completely reversed Obama's policy of engagement with Iran. This is inextricably linked to America's traditional view of Iran as a "rogue state" and a state sponsor of terrorism. It also has to do with Trump's desire to show that he is more capable than his predecessors by dealing with Iran. Obama had tried to "desecuritize" Iran, while the Trump administration has re-securitized it and in so doing improved relations with traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Trump's first foreign trip was to Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Palestinians with an explicit intention to contain Iran. He sold \$110 billion of weapons to Saudi Arabia in that trip, from tanks and combat ships to missile defence systems and cybersecurity technology.⁶⁶ Starting in September 2017, Trump planned to stop declaring to congress that Iran was "in compliance" with the JCPOA and demand a renegotiation with Iran. On October 2017, the Trump administration released a new strategy for Iran, accusing Iran of "developing and proliferating ballistic missiles, supporting terrorism and extremism,

⁶³ Reuters, "U.S. preparing sanctions on Iran over ballistic missile program: sources", 31 December 2015; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-sanctions-idUSKBN0UD1TD20151230>; ; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, "Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube", 9 May 2014; available from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/iran-and-p5-1-solving-nuclear-rubik-s-cube>; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁶⁵ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies", Congressional Research Service, 6 February 2017; available from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1027350>; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁶⁶ New York Post, "Trump signs off on \$110B arms deal in Saudi Arabia", 20 May 2017; available from: <https://nypost.com/2017/05/20/trump-signs-off-on-110b-arms-deal-in-saudi-arabia/>; accessed 28 September 2019.

supporting the Assad dictatorship, and being hostile to Israel”.⁶⁷ On 8 May 2018, finally Trump announced that the United States would formally withdraw from the JCPOA and restore the “toughest sanctions in history” against Iran within six months. It seems that Trump’s concerns on Iran are no longer about the nuclear issue itself, but about its missile programme, its regional expansion and its staunch anti-American policy. On 4 October 2018, the Trump administration released the new US national counter-terrorism strategy, emphasising “America first”, and the threat from Iran to the US national security has significantly increased.⁶⁸ After 2019, US sanctions against Iran are moving the direction of “maximum pressure” aimed at regime change.

Critics, however, argue that this policy has proven counterproductive with Iran putting up maximum resistance against Trump’s pressures. In fact, Iran’s missile tests have intensified after Trump took office. It is hard to say that Rouhani himself is a big proponent of the missiles programme, but it is strongly backed by hardliners led by the IRGC, who have the backing of Khamenei. These tests have further strained relations with the Gulf Arab states, fuelling an arms race in the region. The GCC states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait remain committed to purchasing and fielding the Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system.⁶⁹ This has further stimulated Iran’s missile development activities. It is arguable that Iranian missiles are aimed primarily at the US military bases in the Gulf and Israel and not directly at GCC countries themselves, although the September attack on the Saudi oil installations has raised the temperature to new

⁶⁷ The White House, “President Donald J. Trump’s New Strategy on Iran”; available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran/>; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁶⁸ The White House, “National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America”; available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf>; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁶⁹ Aaron Stein, “Middle East Missile Race: The Missile Defense Review, Iran, and the Implications for the Gulf”, 24 Jan., 2019, Foreign Policy Research Institute; available from: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/01/middle-east-missile-race-the-missile-defense-review-iran-and-the-implications-for-the-gulf/>; accessed 28 September 2019.

heights and led to serious allegations about Iran's regional intentions. The US and Saudi officials have directly pointed fingers at Iran and this has been broadly seen as the hardliners in Iran ratcheting up the pushback against Trump's Administration's maximum pressure policy against Iran. As the Trump administration has pursued openly an intention to drive Iranian oil exports to zero, Iranian hardliners have hit back stating that if Iran "cannot export oil others won't be able to do so either".⁷⁰ This statement has been broadly interpreted as meaning that Iran will endanger the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, from where about 20% of the world's oil shipments pass through.⁷¹

To contain Iran, the US is also trying to forge a NATO-like "Middle East Strategic Alliance" (MESA) with the GCC countries, including Egypt and Jordan. The alliance has yet to form, as Arab states are divided over their policies towards Iran. But the Trump administration has dealt a heavy blow to Iran's desire to improve relations with the GCC, upping the ante with the countries that were hostile to Iran and frustrating the countries that could have been mediators.

Conclusions

Perceiving the real and intensifying tensions between Iran and the GCC states led by Saudi Arabia in terms of a sectarian regional conflict along the shi'it-Sunni lines is oversimplifying the Persian Gulf Regional Security Complex both in its regional and international dimensions. It also overlooks Iran's attempts to improve her relations with these states over the years.

Since Rouhani took office, he has repeatedly put forward peace initiatives to the

⁷⁰ "Struggle In The Strait: Iran, UAE Reopen Talks After Six Years As Business Hub Feels the Heat", 30 July 2019; available from: <https://www.intellinews.com/struggle-in-the-strait-iran-uae-reopen-talks-after-six-years-as-business-hub-feels-the-heat-165187/?source=iran>; accessed 28 September 2019.

⁷¹ BBC News, "Iran tanker seizure: What is the Strait of Hormuz?" 29 July 2019; available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-49070882>; accessed 30 September 2019.

Saudi-led GCC countries. Despite the contacts and cooperation between the two sides on some issues, not all Gulf States have responded positively. This pragmatic policy has borne out little success with the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorating much further than ever before.

Ironically, perhaps, after the signing of the JCPOA, Iran-GCC relations deteriorated even further. Iran's accelerated regional expansion and the Qatar Blockade have arguably changed the power structure in the Persian Gulf region, triggered more tension and insecurity in the area and intensified the scope for a confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially after Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and the introduction of a "maximum pressure policy" against Iran.

As Buzan and Wæver remark, "It is not enough to look at the distribution of power in order to predict the patterns of conflict. Historical hatreds and friendships, as well as specific issues that trigger conflict or cooperation, take part in the formation of an overall constellation of fears, threats, and friendships that define an RSC. These patterns of amity and enmity are influenced by various background factors such as history, culture, religion, and geography, but to a large extent they are path-dependent and thus become their own best explanation."⁷²

This paper has demonstrated that despite her attempts, Iran's inability to improve relations with her Saudi-led GCC neighbours is tied to a pattern of historical mistrust and contemporary enmity intertwined with the changing distribution of regional power. Although a few smaller Gulf States have adopted a more nuanced approach to Iran, the mainstream policy led by Saudi Arabia has been emboldened by a new configuration of Middle East politics that has seen a rare tripartite convergence of interests against Iran between the Saudis, Israel and the USA under Trump.

⁷² Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University, 2003, p. 50.