

# POST-ARAB SPRING SECURITY DYNAMICS IN THE PERSIAN GULF: AN ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

The post Arab Spring developments have affected the security dynamics in the Persian Gulf region. US nuclear deal with Iran is another extra regional power action that has been defining the inter-state relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is argued that the global level factors are affecting the inter-state relations more as compared to the regional factors. The rise of non-state actors, particularly the Islamic State (IS) phenomenon with its challenge to the nation-state system has reinforced the significance of the states at the regional level. By focusing on the regional level analysis under Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), it has been found that the security dynamics in the Persian Gulf region are being determined by the actions or in-actions of the extra regional powers.

## Introduction

The Persian Gulf region occupies a unique geo-economic, geostrategic and geopolitical status in the world. Comprising Iran, Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the region has about two thirds (65 percent) of the proven oil reserves in the world and more than one third (40 percent) of the global natural gas reserves.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia has almost 25 percent of the world's crude oil reserves, followed by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Therefore, these four coastal states of the Persian Gulf in combination possess over 55 percent of the proven world oil resources.<sup>2</sup> Lower costs of exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves along with their location near the transit routes with easy reach to the world markets serve as an added advantage for this region.<sup>3</sup> Geo-strategically, the busiest transit routes of the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-ul-Mandeeb make this area pertinent in the strategic calculations of the regional and extra regional powers. Moreover, being the epicentre of the terrorist and extremist groups, it remains central in the foreign policy calculations of the states.

Owing to the overall significance the states of the Persian Gulf have remained security conscious, particularly after the Second World War. The importance of the area has attained attention of the extra regional powers for

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gaining control of this region. Hence, the security dynamics of the region are quite complex and intricate. For understanding the security apparatus during the cold war, many theoretical attempts have been made by the scholars of international politics. Two major contributions have been made by the proponents of the Neo-Realism and Social Constructivism. Realists have attempted to explain the security dimensions of the Persian Gulf through 'Balance of Power Theory' claiming that the insecurity in the area is the result of contending geopolitical rivalries among the major powers of the region i.e. Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. However, the Constructivists argue that the basis of enmity and conflict is identity-ridden, based upon socially constructed competing ideologies. They justify their argument by explaining the inter-state relations through sectarian and ethnic politics, particularly between Iran on the one hand and Iraq and Saudi Arabia on the other.

The end of the cold war and the disunity exposed among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in the wake of the Gulf war (1991) made the earlier theoretical frameworks insufficient to comprehend the security complexities of the region. In this backdrop came the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which by focusing mainly on the regional level analysis combined both structural Realism and Social Constructivism for understanding the security dynamics of different regions of the world. Under RSCT, Middle East was considered as a regional security complex within which lies the Persian Gulf Sub-Complex. According to Barry Buzan, the standard form for an RSC is a pattern of rivalry, balance-of power, and alliance patterns among the main powers within the region. To this pattern can then be added the effects of penetrating external powers. Normally the pattern of conflict stems from factors indigenous to the region – such as, in the Middle East—and outside powers cannot usually define or reorganize the region.<sup>4</sup>

This study is based upon the RSCT, with few exceptions. Firstly, only the Persian Gulf sub-complex of the Middle East region is studied. Secondly, only regional level analysis is undertaken to explain the nature of the inter-state relationship among states, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Focusing only on the inter-state rivalry under the regional level analysis, this paper has studied three main variables i.e. Alliance dimensions, balance of power and the pattern of rivalry based upon amity/enmity relations. The main research enquiry is related to the empirical and theoretical findings associated with the changes that have taken place in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. It has been argued in this study that in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the extra regional actions are

defining the security parameters as against the claim that the inter-state dynamics attracts the external intervention.

Empirically, security related changes in the above-mentioned variables have been explored and theoretically, the main assumptions of the RSCT are tested for assessing if they are still valid for understanding the developments initiated after the Arab uprisings. Following the introductory section of this paper, the next three sections are devoted to the investigations related to the changes taken place in alliance dimensions, balance of power and in the pattern of rivalry, respectively. Whereas the findings linked to the validity of the main assumption of the theory are discussed in the final section of the study.

### **Anarchy & Alliance Dimension**

The very first feature of a regional security complex is its anarchic nature. Before Iranian revolution, both Iran and Saudi Arabia were status quo states, balancing out the greater threats of Nasserism and other such anti-status quo movements in the wider Middle East regional security complex. The real manifestation of anarchy in the Persian Gulf regional sub-complex was visible when an anti-status quo regime in Iran came to power via revolution.

The formation of the GCC was in fact a measure to check the potential import of Iranian regime's revolution. This security alliance was limited to the regime security concerns of the Gulf states and was being guaranteed by the U.S for its own energy related concerns. The fact that Iraq did not remain part of the GCC security alliance indicates the nature of anarchy in the region, where Iran, Iraq and the Gulf states were experiencing its implications i.e. security dilemma and self help system. This set up defined the tri-polar nature of rivalry of the Persian Gulf regional complex, in which Iraq was principally balancing the power of Iran. Both states were perceiving security dilemma vis-à-vis the power projection of each other. Iran, by utilizing the military and economic help from the USSR and Iraq by banking on the support of the US resorted to self-help system. The security of the Gulf States was ensured by the US, therefore, showing an overlay of the great power but only in the western part of the Gulf region.

The weakening of Iraq due to the physical intervention of the US during the Gulf war of 1991 coupled with the prolonged sanctions against it disturbed the balance of power in the region. However, the still integrated structure of the state of Iraq under Saddam Hussian maintained the power balance in the region.

But, his removal in 2003 triggered by the invasion of the U.S shattered the balance of power resulting in the intensification of the anarchic nature of the Persian Gulf Sub-Complex. For Saudi Arabia, the presence of Iraq under Saddam Hussian, even under severe economic sanctions, worked as a balancer against Iran. Sadaam had been checking the Iranian influence in the region and the Saudi regime considered him a deterrent vis-à-vis Iran. The space created by the fall of Saddam Hussian allowed Iran to fill the power vacuum. In Iraq, the new Shia led government of Iraq to fall into the influence of Iran.

The presence of the US forces did not allow Iraq to become a playing field for contending competitors of the region. However, the withdrawal of forces from Iraq along with the beginning of the Arab uprisings not only made Iraq, but also other states like Bahrain, and Yemen to become the playing field of power rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Later, the deterioration of stability in Syria gave another battle field for both countries to flex their muscles for regional hegemony.

The opening of many battle fronts exposed cleavage in the GCC security alliance when Qatar, sensing the dangers of instability triggered by the Arab revolts, began exerting its influence in the region keeping away from Saudi Arabia.

The Arab Spring have highlighted the long-standing rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with Doha seeing Riyadh as a meddlesome and overbearing big brother, and Riyadh perceiving Doha as an upstart—one whose overly ambitious policies and claims imply that it is acting as an agent on behalf of some other regional or international power.<sup>5</sup>

Before the uprisings, Qatar's foreign policy was directed to play the role of mediator among conflicting parties for multiple objectives, like countering the influence of Iran in the Gulf region, expanding its regional influence vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia<sup>6</sup> and establishing itself as an international ally of the West.<sup>7</sup>

Strategy of Saudi Arabia and Qatar vis-à-vis Iran has been the same, but tactics are different. Arab Spring changed Qatar's foreign policy from mediation to active partisanship. It showed aggressive foreign policy to adapt with changes so that revolutionary changes are kept at bay. The change in Qatar's foreign policy is being defined by changes at the domestic level. The societal level revolts in the Middle East changed the threat calculations of the Qatar's regime and it started to perceive potential of the revolutionaries of taking power in their

hands. Therefore, in anticipation the Qatar regime used its financial cushion and media skills to support these groups in order to make them allies.

In Syria, Qatar has not only armed the Free Syrian Army, it has also successfully helped the creation of National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces uniting the different groups of the Syrian opposition.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the policies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia have generally been consistent particularly, when the challenge of instability reaches their backyard, for instance the commonality of their strategies in Bahrain, Yemen, and Iran. They differ prominently when it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudis distrust and the Qataris embrace.<sup>9</sup> Saudi regime felt threatened from the Muslim Brotherhood because in Saudi Arabia, Sahwa or Post-Sahwa group, which was held responsible for the Islamic awakening movement in early 1990s, had been ideologically associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, there was a considerable following of Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Qatar but it did not consider it as a threat to its existence. The Muslim Brotherhood educationists had not only built the educational system in Qatar but they had also educated its bureaucrats; therefore, it had many sympathizers in the Qatari establishment.<sup>11</sup>

Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups inside the Gulf region as a whole and Egypt and Syria in particular intensified its diplomatic row with Saudi, Emirati and Kuwaiti regimes in 2014 resulting in the withdrawal of ambassadors by the latter governments from Qatar. Although the intensity of the diplomatic crises has been lessened and currently there are full diplomatic engagements between the Gulf regimes, yet, the incident has exposed disunity among the GCC states, which is one of the significant Post-Arab Spring developments. This divergence of interests has significantly affected the GCC joint stand against Iran in the Persian Gulf politics.

Another instance of differences among the GCC states, in the aftermath of Arab Spring, is the proposal for the creation of GCC federation from Saudi Arabia. However, it was categorically rejected by all with the exception of Bahrain.

It seems that the only state in the Gulf depending entirely for its security concerns is Bahrain. Bahrain's population is majority Shiite with the number between 70-75 percent. The Al-Khalifa monarchy is Sunni and bolsters its position with Saudi support to counteract perceived Iranian influence among

its Shiite population.<sup>12</sup> Since its inception, Iran has irredentist claims on it. Unlike other Gulf States, Bahrain is not exceptionally rich in hydrocarbon energy resources. Furthermore, its geo-strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis Iran makes it security dependant on the GCC.

So far as other states of the GCC, they have their own diplomatic and tactical policies towards Iran. For instance, in the wake of the establishment of a pragmatic government in Iran under Hassan Rouhani, Kuwait's Emir visited Tehran for the first time in June 2014 and met with the supreme leader of Iran. This followed on with the reopening of UAE's diplomatic relations with Iran in November 2013.<sup>13</sup> Recently, in response to the execution of Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr, the incident of the attack and burning of Saudi Embassy occurred in Iran. In reaction, only Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have severed diplomatic ties with Iran, while the United Arab Emirates has only downgraded its diplomatic presence.<sup>14</sup>

### **Balance of Power Polarity**

After the fall of Saddam Hussian till the beginning of Arab Spring, the regional security complex of the Persian Gulf was characterized by the typical bipolar rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It is longstanding structural tensions [that] appear to characterize much of the relationship between these oil-rich powers, each possessing aspirations for Islamic leadership and differing visions of regional order, which have resulted in a rivalry that could potentially undermine the overall stability of the region.<sup>15</sup>

In the absence of Iraq as an integrated state, both Tehran and Riyadh aspired for regional hegemony. However, the space for their manoeuvring was limited to Iraq only. The chaos related to Sunnis resentment against Shia government intensified sectarianism and Saudi Arabia jumped into the arena for balancing Iran's power in Iraq with the help of Jihadists.

With the initiation of the Arab uprisings across the Middle East, different states experienced instability or civil war creating a huge vacuum to be filled by the contending rivals. Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria became the playing fields for both Iran and Saudi Arabia for flexing their muscles. In this context, the defeat of Saddam Hussain and the inability of the U.S to control Iraq favoured Iran.<sup>16</sup>

The Arab uprisings tilted balance of power towards Iran. The removal of Saddam indicates that the interstate rivalry has not pulled great powers intervention in the regional security complex. Instead the great powers intervention has changed the nature of security dynamics in the region.

In Bahrain, a political issue related to the domestic demands of constitutional monarchy and equal rights was securitized due to the transformed balance of power with Iraq going into chaos. The rise of Islamic State (IS) has reinforced the Iranian policy of supporting Assad. Despite economic losses, which the pragmatic president Rouhani has vowed to redress, the strategic significance of Syria does not allow to change his policy vis-à-vis Syria. Abandoning Syria would mean loss of the only Arab ally along with the loss of the strategic access to Hezbollah.<sup>17</sup>

The intensification of Saudi-Iran rivalry through heightened sectarianism is giving wide space to terrorists groups like IS to exploit the Sunni sentiments and use against shias. Considering an all-out confrontation with Iran counter-productive, Saudi regime like Iran, has resorted to asymmetric warfare by strengthening anti-Iran proxy groups in different regional theatres in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon etc. However, in its immediate backyard in Bahrain and Yemen, it has directly fought the Iranian backed Shia elements. The strategy employed by both Iran and Saudi Arabia is a replica of cold war strategic dynamics, where the US and the USSR never came one to one against each other. However, they used their proxies when the other had physically intervened in conflicting theatres.

By default, the IS phenomena helped increase the Iran's influence in the region as Iraq, Hezbollah, Syrian regime, Hamas and the Shiite militias in Iraq got united against the IS under the leadership of Iran. The consequential scenario transformed the US strategy also. The advancement of the IS related terrorists' threat became the main occupation of Washington. Iran's regional clout and its strategic significance vis-a-vis the IS expansionism pushed the US towards a flexible policy vis-à-vis Iran and the Bashar's regime. The signing of the nuclear deal with Iran and dropping the demand of Bashar's ouster from the government indicates the US strategy of keeping Iranian led alliance viable for fighting against the IS territorial gains.

The consequential scenario has lessened the relative capabilities of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime, on the one hand is threatened by the potential gains of Iran due to the relaxations in the nuclear deal and on the other hand, it feels isolated by perceiving a tangible tilt of the US towards Iran. These perceptions of threat can explain the Saudi assertive and aggressive foreign policy behaviour in Yemen and also in the formulation of a counter-terrorism alliance of 34 Sunni Muslim countries.

### **Patterns of Amity and Enmity**

The rivalry in the Persian Gulf region particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be best understood by invoking social constructivists' perspective. The past engagements between communities or states serve as building blocks for the social construction of each other's perceptions. Perception has a major role to play in intentions and behaviour. Thus, it can be argued that perception is influenced by social constructs.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the nature of relationship between India and Pakistan is determined by the historical interactions of the Hindus and the Muslims in the sub-continent. Indian and Pakistani perceptions about each other are socially constructed on the basis of their past engagements. Identity plays an instrumental role in the socially constructed perceptions of "others" in international system. It has been the acute sense of Muslim identity that shaped Pakistani behaviour vis-à-vis India.

Same theoretical assumption can be made for understanding the mutual perceptions of Iranian and Saudi regimes about each other. Since Iranian revolution, the identity of Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Muslim world has been challenged. The Saudi dynasty has always been worried over Iranian aims of exporting its ideological revolution in the Gulf States. This challenge to identity has been cemented into perception by Iranian intentions and activities of the past. Saudi leadership portrays Iran as a country, who wants to transport its revolutionary ideology and strengthen its potential leadership among Shia populations. It also wants to increase its influence in neighbouring states at the cost of Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> It is must for its existence as an ideological state. Iran's actions vis-à-vis Bahrain and the Saudi perceptions about it are cases in point.

Iran's irredentist claim over Bahrain was made under Raza Shah Pahlavi in 1957, when the parliament referred to the country as Iran's fourteenth province.<sup>20</sup> This sentiment was repeated again in 2009, when a senior Iranian governmental official said Bahrain had been Iran's fourteenth province until



1970.<sup>21</sup> Bahrain was concerned about the perceived Iranian threat despite the fact that Shah had officially recognized its sovereignty even before the British withdrawal; as such, it turned to the United States and Saudi Arabia for support.<sup>22</sup> After Bahrain's independence, a Shiite Islamist group backed by Iran attempted to overthrow the Khalifa family.<sup>23</sup>

During the Arab uprisings in Bahrain, the perceptions among Saudi and Bahraini regimes about Iran prompted them to link the political protests with the irredentist claims of Iran over Bahrain. However, an independent commission that investigated the Bahraini uprising, delivered a report in November 2011 and found no solid proof of Iranian intervention.<sup>24</sup> The GCC monarchies moved quickly to use their wealth for handouts to increase regime legitimacy, something that, without Saudi support, Bahrain would be unable to do.<sup>25</sup>

Yemen's case, during the Arab Spring, is yet another prominent example where perceptions have shaped GCC states' behaviour vis-à-vis Iran. Iranian regime has been perceived as providing political and media support for the Houthis tribe causing tensions with Saudi Arabia and Yemen, both of whom are afraid of destabilization.<sup>26</sup>

The Saudi perceptions about Iranian threat have been reinforced, when the US signed nuclear deal with Iran. In the background of this deal, which apparently addressed the nuclear threat of Iran, there has been a perception in the Kingdom that the Obama administration has been abandoning its traditional allies.<sup>27</sup> Washington's acquiescence to Iran, which left Iran a nuclear threshold state, unfettered to continue its military ballistic missile program and advance a hostile regional agenda is perceived in Riyadh as a tilt of president Obama towards Iran. His statement for reforms in Saudi Arabia or his opinion that a strategic balance is needed between Sunnis and Shiites mainly reinforces this perception. Saudi Arabia is filling the vacuum left by the American retrenchment with an aggressive, pro-active foreign policy in Yemen and in the oil market. Just as Iran claims the leadership of Shiites, the Kingdom does that of Sunnis, as manifested by establishing a 34 member Sunni Islamic Military Alliance.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Iranian perception about Saudi Arabia is shaped by the latter's dealings with its Shia minority. Shia in Saudi Arabia and also in Bahrain experience significant discrimination, which threatens the Shia identity of Iran.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Saudi Arabia's policy of keeping oil prices down is perceived by Iran as

a measure taken to restrict Iranian development.<sup>30</sup> Both states, Iran and Saudi Arabia are wary of each other's specific interpretation of Islam, which they consider as a threat to their ideological existence. These threat perceptions are constructed in a way that leaders of both sides use religious narratives in their statements. For instance, when Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr was arrested in July 2012, he was charged by the Saudi authorities with "inciting sectarian strife and supporting rioting" as well as "waging war on God". In reaction, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini warned Saudi Arabia that it would face "divine revenge" for what he claimed for the killing of an "oppressed scholar".<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The findings in this research reveal significant changes in the alliance pattern, polarity and the nature of amity/enmity relationship in the regional security complex of the Persian Gulf. Since the US withdrawal from Iraq and particularly after the beginning of the upheavals in the Arab world, the level of anarchy in the Persian Gulf has increased with no stable security structure in existence. The Arab monarchies of the region have perceived growing insecurity in the aftermath of societal based revolutions and specifically after the US tilt towards Iran. At present the prospects for stable security system seems fragile given the shift in the US strategies particularly.<sup>32</sup>

The weakening of Iraq, with the disengagement strategy of President Obama, gave a wide space to be occupied by Iran. The consequential scenario has changed the alliance pattern in the Persian Gulf as well as in the wider Middle Eastern region. Since Arab uprisings, five years down the road, Iran has been well set with Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah as its strategic allies. Alliance pattern has tilted in favour of Iran. Iraq, being ruled by Shia led government, is under its political influence. Iran's strategic support to Syria has made Asad regime intact and Hezbollah, being supported by Iranian regime, is virtually controlling the state of Lebanon.

On the other hand, the Gulf monarchies, which had been banking upon the US for their security against the threat of Iran are left alone, depending upon their own muscles for ensuring security. Even within them, on the platform of GCC, a prominent cleavage has been noticed with Qatar playing independent and assertive role in the aftermath of the Arab spring. Saudi Arabia's ideas of federation of GCC states by including even Jordan and Morocco has not been materialized.

So far as balance of power in the Persian Gulf is concerned, it has also been shifted, especially with the rise of so many battle fields available to the rival contenders, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, the use of proxies for enhancing power by the opposing states has strengthened the significance of non-state actors. The perpetual dependence of the states on the non-state actors is empowering them to the level of almost independence.

The ground realities appeared in the form of the rise of IS, coupled with the shift in balance of power in favour of Iran has also compelled the US administration to modify its policy vis-à-vis Iran and the Asad regime. In spite of the reservations shown by the Gulf allies, the Obama administration went for the deal with Iran. Moreover, unlike its allies the US has dropped the demand of removal of Asad regime as a pre-condition for establishing stability in Syria. Washington administration is mindful of the threat of the IS. It also understands the significance of the Iranian backed Asad regime in physically containing the expansion of the IS. For the US administration, a sanction free Iran and strong Asad forces may be in a better position to confront the onslaught of the IS.

The amity/enmity patterns in the Persian Gulf region is still being dictated by identity based social constructions. Being the main state of the region, both Iran and Saudi Arabia owe their existence to a particular religious ideology. The regimes of both states perceive each other through the lens of identity by placing each other in the category of the 'other'. In the aftermath of the Arab spring, however, their ideological ridden identity has not only been challenged by each other but also by the alternative ideologies of Jihadist salafism of the IS and the political salafism of the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, the sectarian based politics has gained extraordinary momentum in the inter-state relations of the region. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have significantly been projecting their respective sectarian identities and are involved in the alliance making on same fault lines. "Sectarianism and ideology shape relations, but do not define them."<sup>33</sup> The ultimate rationale behind the use of specific sub-religious ideologies is to enhance their power capabilities with respect to each other.

## NOTES

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