



GEOPOLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*A contribution to the development of the political
realist tradition in the 21st century*

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Abstract:

With the unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the rise of an unpredictable unipolar international system, and the absence of interstate conflicts, scholars of the political realist tradition found themselves scrambling to explain the empirical contradictions of realism's core tenets and assumptions. The realist school of thought fragmented in multiple nuanced and specialised theoretical frameworks, each deviating, to various degrees, from the core assumptions and principles of the realist tradition. Realist scholars found themselves divided between those who believed that this paradigm shift developed the realist tradition, against those who argued that it degenerated it.

The purpose of this paper is to support the argument of the former, insisting that the realist tradition must be revitalised in order to maintain its relevance in academia and among policy makers. This contribution is made by deductively testing the merits of neoclassical realism on a particular case study, namely the geopolitical and ideological rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Neoclassical realism, first coined by Gideon Rose in 1998, differs from previous realist frameworks by explicitly incorporating both external and internal variables, arguing that a state's foreign policy and grand strategy is driven first and foremost by its position in the international system, and secondly by its internal composition and characteristics.

At its essence, the core argument is that while a purely structural analysis of the great power competition between the two states can go a long way, it is an inadequate approach to comprehend multiple pivotal elements and nuances of the rivalry. Consequently, this paper aims at providing compelling arguments to illustrate that the origin of the rivalry needs to be identified through a combination of systemic and domestic variables. Following the neoclassical realist framework, it identifies the multipolar regional (dis)order and asymmetrical balance of power in the Middle East as the primary driver of the state's foreign policy. The secondary driver in this context is the state's internal attributes, particularly the ruling ideology, the structure, and the ethno-national and religious composition of the state. In conclusion, this paper will provide compelling evidence to support the argument that while geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran predates the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the revolution greatly exacerbated the rivalry by adding ideological and sectarian elements, thus embroiling both sides into an existential fight for domestic stability and regional influence. Western interference in the region, combined with the 2010-2011 Arab Spring Revolutions, further aggravated the struggle for regional supremacy. Alas, the rivalry continues to manifest itself as a 'Cold War' through third country conflicts across the region, thus aggravating, complicating, and protracting regional conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Keywords: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Islamic Republic of Iran, political realism, neoclassical realism, geopolitics, ideology, rivalry, power, soft power, sectarianism, nationalism.

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1. Introduction

On 3 January 2020, a United States drone struck a convoy of vehicles near Baghdad International Airport. Among the casualties were Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds forces, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a high-ranking officer and commander of Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militia operating in Iraq. The next day, U.S. President Donald J. Trump issued a statement in which he described the IRGC as a terrorist organisation responsible for the targeting, injuring, and murdering of hundreds of American civilians and servicemen (The White House, 2020). In Iran, the death of Soleimani was decried as national tragedy and war crime which required immediate retaliation. The response came on 8 January 2020, in a missile strike which impacted heavy damage on two American military bases in Iraq. Although the Iranian missile strike did not inflict any casualties, it marked a new high in U.S.-Iranian tensions and widespread concerns for further military escalations in the region (Dodman: 2020; Smith: 2020; Martinez & McLaughin: 2020).

These events were preceded by several incidents raising regional security concerns, including the shoot-down of an American drone, attacks on multiple merchant ships in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, a missile strike against Saudi Arabian oil facilities, air strikes against paramilitary groups in Iraq, and attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Together, they mark the increased tensions between the United States and its regional allies on one hand, and Iran and its state and non-state allies on the other. A turning point, it may be argued, was President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018, thus implementing new, and reimposing previous, economic sanctions against Iran (Pickrel: 2019; Kaur, Kim & Sherman: 2020). But tensions between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the U.S. can be traced as far back as to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which ended the monarchy of the Pahlavi dynasty, and marked the beginning of a new theocratic regime in Tehran (Mabon, 2013: 1-7).

The revolution drastically altered the political structure of the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Iran both aspiring a position of leadership in the Persian Gulf region and the wider Islamic world, thus increasing pre-existing geopolitical rivalry, while simultaneously establishing new ideological and sectarian areas of competition. The geopolitical rivalry originates from conflicting national interests, predominately overlapping territorial claims over multiple islands and natural resources in the Persian Gulf; divergence in regards to international and regional alliances and alignments; and an escalating spiral of increased military capabilities perceived as threatening to the security of the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran (Juneau, 2019). The ideological competition stems from diverging and conflicting state ideologies, exacerbated by ethno-national and religious identities, predominately Arab-Persian nationalism, and Sunni-Shia sectarianism. Historically, Arabs and Persians have competed and fought for influence over the Gulf region, thus straining relations between the two groups. Sectarian disputes originate from the Islamic schism that divided Muslims between the Sunni and Shia denominations of Islam. While the Saudi monarchy claim legitimacy through tradition and continuity on one hand, and through the

conservative Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam on the other, the republican constitution of Iran is established upon principles of governance stemming from a particular interpretation of Shia Islam. These two forms of government can be perceived as ideological oppositions and theologically incompatible. On one hand, Saudi Arabia considers itself to be the guardian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which is an integral aspect of the regime's claim to internal and external legitimacy. On the other hand, Iran claims that Saudi Arabia's interpretation of Islam is heretic, and that the regime's relations with Western powers – particularly the presence of American troops on Saudi soil – makes it an illegitimate ruler of the holy cities. More than four decades after the 1979 revolution, Iran maintains a revisionist agenda and an official political narrative of universal Islamic revolutionary export, aimed at the Muslim world in its entirety (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 1-20). Together, the geopolitical and ideological competition between two states poses an internal and external security dilemma, which is perceived as a high-risk threat against the survival of the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran (Mabon, 2013: 198-216).

This regional great power competition has manifested itself through policies of engagement in political and military conflicts across the region, with both sides supporting opposing forces, state and non-state actors alike. In this light, the Arab Spring, a series of widespread anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and 2011, accelerated and reinforced regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. From a Saudi perspective, the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, which toppled long-standing authoritarian regimes, posed a significant threat to the stability of the regime in Riyadh. The ousting of these regimes destabilised the region and made room for the rising of other actors, including democracy-oriented political parties, political Islamic movements, terrorist organisations, and other violent non-state actors. Concerned by the potential spill-over effect of such movements, which would constitute a significant domestic threat to the Saudi regime, substantial efforts have been made to suppress them at their origin and to mitigate the domestic effects. While Saudi Arabia considered the Arab Spring an existential threat, Iran saw an opportunity to break the status quo and expand its influence abroad. By intervening in the domestic affairs of other states, whether in favour of the opposition or the regime, Iran successfully increased its political and military influence in the region, and established or expanded significant alliances with several influential actors across the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen (Hiro, 2019: 241-274). Both Saudi Arabia and Iran intervened across the region through the use of soft and hard power capabilities, thus exacerbating and protracting the existing conflicts and intensifying the sectarianisation of the region's geopolitical battles (Salloukh, 2013).

While it may be tempting to simplify the rivalry through a primordialist explanation of two opposing regimes, based on mutually incompatible sectarian and ethno-national identities, this approach is considered to have an insufficient explanatory value. It would be unable to account for the crossing of sectarian, national, and ideological lines, an approach both states have implemented in supporting various regional actors for the pursuit of national interests (Ibid.; Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 57-94). Likewise, a purely instrumentalist approach also has its fault lines. While the

argument that state leaders abuse ethnic, religious, or ideological identities for political motives have some merit in this context, instrumentalism “often does not exhaust to its full extent the potential of what rationalism as a paradigm has to offer” (Beck, 2020: 87). Of the various rationalist school of thought, neorealism seems to have significant explanatory value in a Middle Eastern context, where anarchy, conflicts, insecurity, and multipolarity forms the structure of the regional political environment. Yet, a purely structural analysis of the rivalry excludes domestic factors and is thus unable to account for internal variables influential to the foreign policies and grand strategies of the two states. In a Middle Eastern context, where heterogeneous states are the rule, rather than the exception, and where transnational and sub-national identities are central to the foreign and domestic policy formation on several states, such an approach seems as a drastic oversimplification of complex interstate rivalry (Ibid.: 87-88). As such, the best performing explanatory strategy is arguably a neorealist approach supplemented with inspiration from social constructivist insights. This is well aligned with the neoclassical realist (NcR) theoretical framework, which will be used to conduct the analysis of the geopolitical and ideological rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Contrary to former realist theoretical frameworks, NcR recognises the importance of the structural composition of the international system, as well as the domestic constraints and incentives within the individual units. NcR rejects the notion that states are unitary actors, instead, it recognises the importance of domestic factors, such as state structures, ideologies, political narratives, threat perceptions, or demographic elements such as ethno-national, tribal, and religious groups. Critics would argue that the proliferation of variables disturb the parsimonious analytical framework provided in earlier realist approaches, and that NcR and similar conditional approaches have significant methodological and epistemological deficiencies and inconsistencies (Vasquez, 1997; Wivel, 2002). These points of critique are reasonable and justifiable to a certain extent. Nonetheless, after a careful consideration of relevant theoretical frameworks, NcR seems to have the strongest explanatory value in the analysis of the rivalry. In this sense, this paper can be perceived as a test of the merits of NcR on a particular case study, thus contributing to the development of the realist tradition.

This paper is structured in the following way: the subsequent section will introduce some considerations of the limitations of this research, followed by a brief review of relevant literature used for the overall theoretical considerations and for the case-specific material. This will be succeeded by an overview of the methodology. The subsequent section will briefly present three of the main realist school of thought: classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism, which is necessary in order to fully comprehend the latter. Following the theoretical overview, an analytical section will test the NcR approach to the case of interregional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The analytical section is divided between a structural analysis of the regional balance of power, focusing on the following variables: 1) state alliances and asymmetrical alliances, and 2) the manifestation of power through the extraction of conventional and unconventional military capabilities. The second part of the analysis will focus on unit-level variables, predominately state

structures and ideologies on one hand, and the ethno-national and religious composition of the states on the other hand. Overall, the scope of the analysis is to investigate how the regional structure, combined with the selected domestic factors, affects the foreign policies and grand strategies of the two regional rivals. The analysis is succeeded by a discussive conclusion, focusing on the merits of NcR in general and on this case study in particular, the future of political realism in the 21st century, alongside some epistemological and ontological reflections inspired by a social constructivist critique of the realist tradition.

2. Limitations and Points of Critique

As in any other academic research, some key limitations have formed the frame of the paper, thus resulting in a selective prioritisation of some aspect. Limitations included the restrictions of the size of the paper and the time available to produce it. Furthermore, because the chosen case study and the use of theory are quite broad, serious considerations and decisions had to be made in order keep the paper within the required limits. Extensive amount of literature and data is available, both regarding realism at large and NcR in particular, and in terms of the case study of geopolitical and ideological rivalry in Middle East. This has consequently required a restrictive selection of the absolute most relevant literature, which will be accounted for in the literature review. Furthermore, various other realist theories and approaches could have been included, thus making the paper's theoretical section more elaborated and the choice of NcR as the appropriate theory more justifiable. Asides from the selected realist ramification – classical realism, neorealism, and NcR – one could have included other realist approaches or specific realist theories, such as postclassical realism or balance of threat theory (Wivel, 2002: 432; Walt, 2013).

Another reasonable critique is that the use of NcR moves the investigation away from the parsimonious and generalised approach of neorealism, and closer towards a more precise and yet more complex and confounding analysis. Arguably, the purity and simplicity of earlier versions of realism is forfeited in exchange for a broader and more elaborated analysis. Some critics would argue that recent realist ramifications incorporate incompatible core assumptions that degenerate rather than develop the realist tradition. As a result, NcR's enrichment of the realist paradigm can be criticised for initiating a proliferation of emendations and ad hoc explanations that prevents falsification. Arguably, the NcR approach also includes methodological concerns, where it may remain unclear why specific variables have been selected, why others are deemphasised or ignored, and whether the chosen variables are mutually compatible (Vasquez, 1997; Wivel, 2002). The selection of variables will be elaborated in the methodology section. Additionally, while the NcR framework is malleable and can be used to a wide range of case studies, it often includes a three layered analysis: structural, domestic, and individual. In this paper, however, the third level of analysis will be excluded, a decision based on the assumption that analysing individual state leaders' threat perceptions at a given time, particularly in this context, will be extremely challenging. Arguably, this analytical approach would be more appropriate in historical cases where relevant sources are available, or in liberal, democratic and transparent states were relevant

information may be more accessible to the public. Strategic threat perceptions will thus only be addressed at a state level, based on reasonable assumptions of what states (i.e., regimes) may perceive as a security issue in a given context.

In terms of the specific case study, strategic limitations have been made in order to keep the analysis within the requirements of the paper. When researching such an extensive case, significant aspects are necessarily left out. This paper uses a restrictive geographical definition of the Middle East¹, which excludes territories in North Africa and Central Asia. Although states in the excluded regions may be mentioned, they are not a focus point of the analysis. While acknowledging that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry can be extended to states within the excluded area, such as in Afghanistan or in Libya, these are identified as second-tier areas of competition, and thus dispensable. Historical limitations have also been implemented. This decision has been made on two accounts: first, rivalry between Arabs and Persians can be traced back to the early Muslim conquests in the seventh and eight centuries, which would make the historical timeline absurdly prolonged. Second, Simon Mabon's *Saudi Arabia & Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* offers an excellent neoclassical realist analysis of the conflict, up to the year 2012-2013, although with some notably different variables and a significant constructivist inclination. Since the rivalry is dynamic and progressing, events succeeding September 2020 will not be included.

In terms of the structural analysis, a more elaborated and detailed analysis of the roles of other significant powers, e.g. Turkey, Israel, or the United Arab Emirates, could have been included. Furthermore, while international political economy is of pivotal importance to the rivalry, particularly in relation to the export of oil, this has not been selected as a central perspective in the analysis. In terms of the domestic analysis, the ethno-national and religious identities have not been subject to an in-depth analysis focusing on cultural, linguistic, or theological differences of the various ethnic and religious groups. Instead, the paper acknowledges the differences between, e.g. Sunni and Shia Islam, and the importance of these differences in the political context of the Middle East, albeit without going into details of the religious practices, traditions, customs, scriptural interpretations, or overall theological and sectarian differences. The same argument is applied in terms of the ethno-national composition of Iran and the influence of tribal identities in Saudi Arabia, leaving these aspects out to theologians, sociologists, and anthropologists respectively.

3. Literature Review

This section of the paper will provide an overview of key literature used to establish an understanding of International Relations as a field of study, core realist assumptions and theories,

¹ The Middle East is in this paper defined as the geographical area consisting of the following states and territories: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. It thus excludes North African and Central Asian states.

the neoclassical realist approach, and case-study literature for the analysis of the geopolitical and ideological rivalry in the Middle East.

According to Brian Leiter, political realism can be described as a broad and elongated school of thought often linked to great thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Holmes, among others (Leiter, 2001). By stretching a school of thought across multiple epochs of human history, vast amount of literature would naturally be embraced. It is beyond the scope and point of this paper to discuss all of these texts. First and foremost, it is important to note that the historical sources which today are often linked to realism, hardly can be defined as a systemised and structured theoretical framework, but rather a vast repository of texts written by different authors for different purposes and in different contexts over the course of two millennia. Ancient thinkers and statesmen, such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, or Claus von Clausewitz, were neither social nor political scientist and rarely adhered to currently accepted methodological and scientific standards of modern academia (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 16).

The first attempts to systemise these philosophical points of view and prepositions were made by early realist scholars of the 20th century. E.H. Carr, an English historian, diplomat and realist theorist, became most known for his famous work *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, which included a critique of the dominance of idealist views in international relations in the interwar period of 1919-1939. The outbreak of the World War II was a consequence of the failure of “utopian political thought”, expressed through the establishment of the League of Nations and the influence of norms, morality, and ethics in international politics (Park, 2019). Similar points of view can be found in the work of other early 20th century scholars, such as John Hertz, Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Frederick Schuman (Scheurman, 2010). The interwar period and the theoretical discussions that took place in this period are often referred to as *The Great Debate*. It is the common conclusion that realism emerged victorious and have since held a dominant role within the academic field of International Relations, arguably with some fluctuations along the way (Wivel, 2002; Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 100).

Particularly Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, would become a central pillar in the classical realist school of thought and one of the most influential books of the 20th century. Morgenthau's books provided a strong critique of the abstract universal values promoted by the liberalist school of thought. Democracy, freedom, human rights, etc., could not, and should not, be exported to illiberal states that had no interest in adopting them. Norms, values, and ideas are different across the globe, and the liberal perception that people everywhere yearn for freedom is a misunderstanding of various cultures, histories, values, and traditions. Given the choice, it is argued, people might opt for order over liberty. A sharp distinction had to be made between what was desirable and what was possible – in order words, statesmen should be realistic about the possibilities and prospects of their foreign policy. Furthermore, because norms, ideas, and values change over time, states should pursue power, as this is the only element that remains stable across time and space. Good intentions by themselves, without power behind them, could do nothing

good - on the contrary, they might make matters worse. Instead, rational policy makers and statesmen should accept the basic principles of human nature and human behaviour, and uphold their primary roles as protectors of their respective countries' national interests and security in a dangerous and anarchic international system (Morgenthau, Clinton & Thompson, 2006; Frei, 2016; Gewen, 2020).

The next milestone in the development of realist theories was set by Kenneth Waltz in 1979 with his book, *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz would through his work contribute to the systemisations and improved methodology of realist theories. Waltz defined his version of political realism as neorealism, emphasising the importance of the structure of the international system as the core reason to the outbreak of war or the preservation of peace (Waltz, 1979). Neorealism, or structural realism, as it may also be referred as, became the dominant realist approach, supported and elaborated by other likeminded theorists, such as Stephen Krasner, Stephen Walt, and Robert Gilpin (Wohlforth, 2008). With the development of neorealism after Waltz, scholars began referring to all of the realist literature of the interwar and early Cold War period as classical realism. In this sense, classical realism should not necessarily be considered a sub-school, but rather the original realist tradition in all of its diversity prior to the publication of Waltz's book in 1979 (Wohlforth, 2008). John Mearsheimer would in 2001 further increase the diversity of realist theories, by in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* proposing a division between 'offensive realism' and 'defensive realism', as sub-categories to neorealism (Mearsheimer, 2001). While both offensive and defensive realism emphasises the structure of the international system as fundamental to the behaviour of states, and that a bipolar structure would be more peaceful than a multipolar one, they disagree on whether states generally speaking can be considered power maximisers or security maximisers, and thus whether they are offensive or defensive in nature (Wohlforth, 2008). Waltz's neorealism has repeatedly been criticised for the 'unitary rational actor assumption', and its negligence of domestic factors in the analysis of state behaviour in international affairs. Deviations from the core assumptions are explained with factors outside of the theory, thus making falsification virtually impossible. The theoretical framework may thus be considered a somewhat parsimonious, simplistic, and generalising theory – whether this is considered a positive or negative feature is disputed. Furthermore, it can be argued that while neorealism offers a prediction on how the structure of the international system may affect state behaviour, it makes no substantial contributions in establishing insight on what specific foreign policies said states will pursue, making it somewhat irrelevant outside academia, and particularly for policy makers (Wivel, 2002).

In 1998, Gideon Rose proposed a new framework for the analysis of international politics in general, and individual states' foreign policy in particular. Rose's approach can be considered a return to the classical realism of the early Cold War era, but without losing neorealism's insights on the importance of the structure and polarity of the international system. At its essence, the NcR approach proposed by Rose can be understood as an analysis of the system structure in

combination with that of domestic factors within the individual states. Alternatively, to use Rose's own words:

It explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. (...) They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level (Rose, 1998: 146).

Rose's framework would soon be reinforced and elaborated by scholars such as Fareed Zakaria, Stevel E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, William Wohlforth, Nicholas Kitchen, and others (Zakaria, 1992; Wohlforth, 2008; Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009; Kitchen 2010). An example of a NcR analysis could be Zakaria's *From Wealth to Power: the Unusual Origins of America's World Role*, in which, contrary to a structural realist analysis, historical and domestic factors are taken into consideration and used to explain the rise of an American-led unipolar international system (Zakaria, 1998). A similar example could include Camilla T.N. Sørensen's article from 2015, which analyses the implementation of Chinese foreign policy in light of a unit-level analysis, combined with the structural analysis of Sino-American rivalry and systemic incentives and constraints (Sørensen, 2015). According to Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, NcR can be considered as a coherent school of foreign policy theories, as it suggests a single independent or explanatory variable (relative power), a common set of intervening variables (e.g. state structures and perceptions of power and threats), and has explicit scope conditions and share a distinct methodological perspective characterised by historical analysis and attention to casual mechanisms (Lobell, Ripsman, Taliaferro, 2009: 7). Critics of NcR would argue that the theory, by distancing itself from Waltz's neorealism, loses the parsimonious purity and methodological coherence offered by Waltz and likeminded theorist (Wivel, 2002: 438-44).

A large and growing body of literature has investigated great power competition in the Middle East, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As a consequence of the extensive amount of case study literature available, a strict selection of core sources has been necessary. Of the case-study literature which this research is based upon, two books are worth highlighting: first, Simon Mabon's *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*, and second, Dilip Hiro's *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy*. In terms of the former, Simon Mabon's research offers an excellent NcR analysis of the domestic and structural factors affecting the ideological and geopolitical soft power competition between the two states. Naturally, the politics of the Middle East have changed dramatically since 2013, thus requiring further amplification. Furthermore, Mabon moves the research further away from realism and closer towards social constructivism, placing much focus on the sociological and anthropological particularities of nationalism, tribalism, and sectarianism. This research can thus be perceived as a two-folded continuation of Mabon's work: an update focusing on the years 2013-

2020, and an inclusion of variables formerly excluded. Dilip Hiro's work has been instrumental in gaining insight in the historical and present rivalry, particularly in a post-Arab Spring regional order. Ervand Abrahamian's *A History of Modern Iran* and Madawi al-Rasheed's *A History of Saudi Arabia* have also held a pivotal role in the understanding of the historical context. Ofira Seliktar's and Farhad Rezaei's *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy War* has been useful in understanding Iran's asymmetrical strategies and its formal and informal relations with non-state actors in third countries.

Additionally, this paper is based upon sources from multiple non-governmental organisations and think-tanks, including, but not limited to, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brookings Institution, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and European Council on Foreign Relations. Databases such as Center for Systemic Peace and the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook are also used to retrieve and analyse relevant data. Furthermore, when other sources are unavailable, articles from selected media are used, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, BBC, France24 and Al-Jazeera. All sources are selected, analysed, and placed into context according to the principles of academic integrity and source criticism. It goes without saying that this particular case study is of a highly politicised and controversial nature, making it fundamental that all sources are screened and used accordingly.

4. Methodology and Research Question

The following section intends to briefly account for the methodological considerations taken in the production of this paper.

Considering the various realist approaches to the analysis of international relations and the foreign policies of various states, it is important to affirm that one theoretical approach is not necessarily superior to others. The appropriate approach, of course, depend on the subject of analysis and the research question at hand. No theory is universally better than others, as they serve different purposes, thus, one may only be better than another in a given context. Neorealism, for example, could be used to explain significant events and outcomes in the international sphere of politics, and may do so well enough to fill the gap in existing literature, or provide a competitive explanation to the prevailing understanding of a subject. By using a different approach in the analysis of the same subject, such as NcR, one would likely come to a different conclusion, or at least be able to include different, but relevant aspects, formerly downplayed or ignored and excluded. Because both approaches serve different purposes and are based on different assumptions, the conclusions would naturally diverge.

In the effort to analyse and understand the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and how influential this rivalry is in the construction and perpetuation of various conflicts of the Middle East, this paper will apply the NcR analytical approach. This decision is in part taken by the assumption that the system structure alone cannot explain in depth, why, how, and under what circumstances this rivalry manifests itself through indirect military confrontations in third

countries. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes to rivalry, and how these causes influence the decision-making process and foreign policies of relevant state actors, a more in-depth analysis than the ones offered by classical realism or neorealism is needed. Consequently, this paper aims at answering the following research question:

How can a neoclassical realist analysis of the anarchic environment and structural polarity of the Middle East, combined with state ideologies and domestic threat perceptions, contribute to an understanding of the regional great power competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

This research question is based upon a hypothesis that the rivalry between the two states is preconditioned as a result of; A) an anarchic international and regional system filled with competing and differentiating units (i.e. states) with conflicting national interests, and; B) the internal dimension and composition of these units affect how, why, and with what success they identify threats and react accordingly to structural and domestic constraints and incentives. Based on these hypothesised preconditions, relative power among the units is identified as the independent variable. At the systemic level, the balance of power - more specifically in terms of alliances and military capabilities - is identified as the intervening variable. At the unit level, the ethno-national and religious minorities within the states, and the domestic and foreign threats these are perceived to constitute in the relation to the ideology and structure of the state, is identified as the intervening variable. The competitive and conflicting grand strategies that Saudi Arabia and Iran are pursuing is consequently identified as the dependent variable.

Due to the scope of this project and the nature of the subject at hand, this paper will be conducted through traditional desk research and qualitative research. Having said this, a few informant interviews with colleagues from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark have been made, although predominately as a mean to retrieve insight and knowledge of relevant state actors and the overall political dynamics in the Middle East. Thus, these sources will not be directly quoted or referred to in the paper or bibliography. Other sources used in this research includes a broad list of books, articles, and dissertations, written by various scholars of realists and non-realist schools. News articles are used when relevant and to a limited extent.

This paper is conducted through a deductive approach. NcR can be considered to be a broad theoretical framework applicable to a variety of scenarios and cases across time and space within the context of international politics. Thus, this paper aims at applying a particular theoretical approach to a specific case study. Furthermore, the use of NcR in this paper will focus predominately on the grand strategy of Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively, and not a particular foreign policy decision at a given time. To use the definition of Nicholas Kitchen, “Grand strategy therefore encompasses not only military means and ends, but the means and ends of politics, economics and ideology, in short all the aspects of power and influence at a nation’s – and therefore, a statemen’s – disposal” (Kitchen, 2010: 120). Grand strategy as an analytical concept should be considered as a set of medium and long-term foreign and domestic policies in both times

of peace and war, that both seeks to achieve the overall ambitions of a given state in the international sphere of politics and prescribe how broad a range of national resources should be utilised in pursuit of those goals (Ibid.: 121).

In conclusion, it is important to clearly state that this paper is not conducted on a normative approach to policy setters. There are no ‘good’ or ‘evil’ actors in this research, as all states and non-state actors are analysed as unbiased and objective ‘units’.

5. Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This section of the paper will briefly introduce International Relations as a field of study. Depending on the context, geographical location, university, and scholar, the study of relationships between political entities may be referred to as International Relations, International Affairs, International Studies, International Politics or Global Studies. For the sake of consistency and simplicity, this paper will henceforward refer to the field of study as International Relations (IR). This section of paper will furthermore introduce realism as a school of thought and theoretical framework, which can be useful to analyse and understand state behaviour, complex events, and political disputes in the international sphere of politics. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of realism, its ramifications, and core theories, this section of the paper will briefly explain the main realist schools of thought: classical realism, neorealism, and NcR. Particular focus will be placed on NcR, the balance of power theory, and the security dilemma, which will be used at a later stage to analyse the interstate rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

5.1. International Relations

IR as a field of study encompasses particular features of international politics, namely elements such as war, peace, globalisation, security, international law, international political economy, development, humanitarian aid, human rights, and more. Traditionally, IR scholars have had a narrow state-centric approach to their research, with a particular focus on the understanding and prediction of state behaviour in the international sphere of politics. This was particularly evident in the aftermath of World War II and in the Cold War period. The dominant schools of thought within IR are realism and liberalism, alongside their branches and sub-theories, which are under an ongoing process of modification and evolution, hand in hand with the development of the international state of affairs (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 2-41).

Towards the end of the Cold War era, IR, as a field of study, has been broadened to include a wider range of actors, aspects, and concepts. Social constructivism, poststructuralism, Marxist theories, and theories of securitisation have all contributed in widening the focus to include non-state actors, but also elements such as identity (religious, ethnic, national, etc.), while broadening the concepts of e.g. security to include not only national security, but also societal security, human security, and environmental security (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 97; Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 2-41; Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006: 109). The focus on power has also changed from strictly

military and economic capabilities, to also include other and less tangible elements, such as soft power. This is in part a reaction to the dramatic change of the international system in modern history, particularly after the end of the Cold War, and with the acceleration of globalisation and the achievement of remarkable technological advancements. While states continue to remain the primary actors, non-state actors, such as intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, private military companies, and other violent non-state actors have all gained a more prominent role in international affairs (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 2-41). Direct interstate wars have also decreased significantly in both numbers and size, while protracted civil wars and conflicts fought through proxies have increased in both numbers and severity (Fisher, 2016; Center for Systemic Peace, n.d.). The rise of the non-state actors and their relations with relevant national governments is naturally a key aspect in the understanding of the conflictual dynamics of the Middle East (Mabon, 2013: 65-66).

In spite of the modern evolution of IR as an academic discipline, the primary actors subject to scholar's research within this field are typically states (Wivel, 2002: 433). A state may be defined as a sovereign territorial entity controlled by a government and inhabited by a population (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 13-15). Scholars tend to trace the international system of sovereign states back to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which established a principle in the international sphere of politics to which each state's government holds exclusive rights of sovereignty over its territory. The principle is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and widely accepted in the international political system as the conventional order of things. Although states are constantly making efforts to influence each other on matters such as trade, alliances, war, etc., it is generally accepted that they should avoid meddling and interfering in the internal matters of other states (Ibid.: 50). Obviously, the principle of state sovereignty has been, and continues to be, challenged repeatedly in a number of ways throughout history, as is also the case in the current geopolitical environment of the Middle East. The Westphalian system of sovereign states assumes congruence between nation and state. This assumption is problematic in the Middle Eastern context, which includes numerous transnational and sub-national identities. Irredentist² movements and trans-state identities can, in this context, be perceived as threats state sovereignty and to the territorial integrity of the state (Mabon, 2013: 107). In this context, this paper will draw inspiration from Barry Buzan's work and conception of the state and the nation, the relation between the two, and the different models of political entities conceptualised as nation-states, state-nations, part nation-state, and multinational-states (Buzan, 1991: 66-77).

While states, at least in theory, should hold an internal monopoly on the use of violence, historical and contemporary examples reflect a somewhat different story. This is particularly evident in failed states, where the monopoly on violence have slipped out of the hands of the *de jure* government, where the legitimacy to rule is contested, and where non-state actors claim the

² A political principle or policy aimed at incorporating a nation (i.e. people) within the boundaries of their historically or ethnically related political entity.

right to govern the whole or part of the territory. This is particularly evident in several states of the Middle East, including in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, among others (Kamrava, 2016: 1-27). It goes without saying that states vary tremendously in their structure, organisation, and internal composition. Ethnic and religious minorities, for example, often play a significant role in the political system of heterogenous states. Kurds in northern Iraq, for example, enjoy a large degree of regional autonomy and have significant influence and leverage towards policy-setters in Baghdad. Lebanon's sectarian constitution provides political influence to Sunnis, Shias, and Maronites alike. The Houthi movement in Yemen has virtually ousted the government in Sanaa and taken control of substantial parts of the country's territory. Thus, the intersection between the state and the various nations living within the state's boundaries, whether constructive or destructive, is instrumental to the success or failure of a given state (Ibid.).

Within the field of IR as an academic discipline, various theories may be categorised in two overall blocs: theories of international politics, and theories of foreign policy. While the former focuses on system structures and general patterns of states behaviour in the international political domain, the latter places emphasis on individual states' foreign policies and grand strategies at a given time. Theories of international politics, such as those used by institutional liberalists or neorealist, may also be defined as grand theories. Such theories can be useful when taking a bird-eye perspective in the analysis of broad and complex systemic outcomes in the international arena of politics, while being at little use when investigating a particular state's foreign policy at a given time (Wivel, 2002: 439-43; Wohlforth, 2008: 9).

5.2. Realism - an Overview

Realism is a highly diverse and contested school of thought and one of the main theoretical frameworks to understand and analyse conflicts among states. While favoured by some scholars and vigorously contested by others, realism has historically held a central position within the field of IR (Wohlforth, 2008). Due to the nature of realism and its focus on interstate conflicts, realist IR scholars are often – mistakenly so – perceived as war hawks and proponents of military actions (Morgenthau, 1965; New York Times, 2002). Arguably, realism as a school of thought is often misunderstood because it is reduced to a single, internally consistent, and logically coherent theory. On the contrary, realism is not, and has never been, a single theory. William C. Wohlforth argues that scholars often refer to three distinct things when discussing 'realist theory'; 1) realism as a large and complex tradition of statecraft and scholarships, 2) sub-schools within realism such as neorealism or NcR, and 3) specific realist theories like the balance of power, balance of threat, and the security dilemma (Wohlforth, 2008). This section of the paper will therefore try to establish an overview of all three elements, with particular focus on NcR, the balance of power theory, and the security dilemma.

Realism is a school of thought that explains international relations in terms of power and power politics, and which is founded upon the principle of dominance (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 43). William C. Wohlforth argues that realism revolves around four central propositions:

- 1) **Groupism:** politics takes place within and between groups and is the core of domestic and international politics. Survival requires cohesion provided by groups solidary, but the same in-group cohesion generates the potential for conflict with other groups. The paramount human groups are nation-states and the most important source of in-group cohesion is nationalism.
- 2) **Egoism:** groups are primarily driven by narrow self-interest. Egoism is rooted in human nature, although its expression may be exacerbated, moderated, or temporarily overcome by national and international political structures, institutions, and values.
- 3) **Anarchy:** the absence of an international government shapes the nature of international relations. The anarchic structure of the international system exacerbates group egoism and limits the ability of international actors to achieve mutually beneficial agreements between states.
- 4) **Power politics:** the combination of groupism and egoism in an environment of anarchy impels states to seek power and security. Power is understood as influence, control, and the ability to coerce individuals or groups, thus, to exercise one's will upon another. (Ibid.: 3).

With the above propositions taken into account, realism sets a pessimistic view of humans as prone to conflict in a continuous struggle for power and security among competing groups. Furthermore, realism adhere to three key elements, namely: 'statism', 'survival', and 'self-help' (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 111). Statism covers the importance of sovereign states as the primary actors in international affairs. Realist concurs with the Weberian definition of the state as "the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Dusza, 1989: 74-75). Just as the state, in theory, guarantees order and security within the boundaries of its territory, so is the anarchic structure of the international system lawless and insecure. The second element refers to survival as the ultimate concern of any state. Realists disagree whether survival is best achieved through the maximisation of security or power, a discussion that will be highlighted later in the paper. The third element, self-help, once again refers to lack of an international government to enforce rules and ensure the survival of states. In this context, individual states can only rely on themselves to survive. Because anarchy shapes the international system, and because the creation of a world government or the rise of an omnipotent hegemon able to implement law and order is unlikely, international politics is expected to continue to be conflictual. Thus, realist dismisses the idea of an 'end of history' or perpetual peace (Fukuyama, 1989; Wohlforth, 2008).

Realists tend to treat political power as separate from, and predominant over, morality, ideology, and other social and economic aspects of life. For realists, ideologies do not matter much, nor do nationalities, religions, or cultural factors with which states may justify their actions. Realists see states with very different religions, ideologies, or economic systems as quite similar in their actions with regard to the pursue of national interest. Although ideology, nationalism, or religion may be used by state leaders as a justification for their decisions, for realist scholars it is

the intention behind the justification, and not the justification itself, that matters the most. *Raison d'état*, or reason of the state, thus plays a key role in a realist worldview (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 44-45; Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 100). Contrary to realists, liberalists argue that moral and ethical principles must govern international politics. For realist thinkers, on the other hand, moral and ethical concerns must be set aside for the survival and well-being of the state, which essentially should be the supreme and final goal of any government and state leader. A common realist point of critique is that liberalists see the world as it ought to be, instead of how it really is (Mearsheimer, 2001: 4; Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 43). While liberals tend to focus on cooperation, interdependency, and democracy, while being relatively positive on the prospects for perpetual peace, realists are more sceptical about the possibilities of a peaceful world through cooperative means (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 82-92). Realism emphasises the need to focus on interest rather than ideology, to seek peace through strength, and to recognise that great powers can coexist even if they have mutually incompatible values and beliefs (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 100).

Power is a central concept in the field of IR, and the dominant one for realist thinkers. To use the words of John Mearsheimer; “What money is to economics, power is to international relations” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 12). But power can be difficult to define and measure, and can include everything from, and in between, military, political, and economic power. It is often described as A’s ability to make B act in a way that he/she/it would not otherwise have done. Such potential to influence others can be based on specific characteristics or possessions of a state, such as its size, location, armed forces, economy, etc. This is power as a capability, which is easier to measure compared to influence. The domestic mobilisation of capabilities and extraction of resources, often through religion, ideology, and nationalism, is also a significant source of power. States are in a constant effort to measure and compare their rival’s capabilities, making relative power a central concept within the realist school of thought. The logic of power suggest that wars will always be won by the most powerful states, but this is not always the case (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011: 45-49).

Realists believe that the international system exists in a state of anarchy, a term that implies not complete chaos or absence of structure and rules, but rather the lack of a central government that can enforce rules. This anarchic structure – the lack of legitimate monopoly on violence – is what differentiates politics between states and politics within states (Wivel, 2002: 433). With the lack of a central authority to uphold peace and enforce laws, states can only be left to rely on themselves to ensure self-preservation. Most realist scholars believe in the pessimistic worldview that the international political system cannot escape from this state of anarchy, and, as such, international politics will continue to be dangerous. Critics would argue that realists’ propositions and assumptions are self-fulfilling prophecies (Wendt, 1992). While alliances and international agreements may prove useful in the short-term, these are simply means of temporarily convenience. As a state’s intentions may change quickly and unexpectedly, a rival state should focus on its capabilities, rather than its short or medium-term intentions. States should never rely

on other than themselves to ensure their interest and survival, or in other words, states should be prudent (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 102).

Generally speaking, realism can be divided into three main theoretical frameworks: classical realism, neorealism, and NcR. Further divisions of realism may be used, nonetheless, as the above-mentioned are the central ones, and as a consequence of the limitations of this paper, only these will be addressed (Wivel, 2002). While key concepts and the principal assumptions of realism are present in all its branches, some differ significantly in their explanation of how and why conflicts occur in the international sphere of politics. In order to comprehend these overall differences, the following section will provide a brief overview of each key ramification of realism.

5.3. Classical Realism

Classical realism considers human nature as the primary feature in the international political system. Humans, it is argued, are selfish and self-interested, which leads them to take immoral or amoral actions. According to Brian Leiter, “Human beings are ‘selfish’ in the precise sense that in acting their *primary* (though perhaps not their exclusive) motivation is that they expect an action to: (a) constitute their well-being; or (b) contribute (as a means) to their well-being” (Leiter, 2001).

Examples of actors’ well-being could include power, fame, and wealth. But the actions conducted by actors are not necessarily always rooted in wish to improve the status quo, but also in protecting what has already been gained, thus resulting in fear, suspicion, and insecurity. The behaviour of the state as self-seeking egoist actor is understood to be a reflection of the characteristics of human beings that governs said state (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2014: 103-4) Although egoism is usually substantially restrained by the internal hierarchical political order of a state, international anarchy allows, or even encourages, the expression of the worst aspects of human nature, thus enforcing a struggle for power in times of war and peace alike (Donnelly, 2013: 34-36).

The Athenian annihilation of the Melians during the Peloponnesian War is a historical example used frequently by realist scholars as a classroom example and case study of how humans lust for power sets aside all concerns of morality and legality, which, in turn, illustrates the ultimately selfish and pragmatic concerns that motivate a state at war. Judicial or moral justifications are set aside while power politics, rationality, and political ambitions prevail. Justice is only available between two equal parties, thus clearly exemplifying the realist emphasis on power and dominance as a central element in the international political system (Crane, 1998: 61-65). The lack of consideration towards justice and morality is also clearly present in the work of Hans J. Morgenthau. Classical realists believe that international politics reflects human nature, arguing that “(...) politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature” (Morgenthau, Clinton & Thompson, 2006: 4). Academic symptoms such as legalism, moralism, and perfectionism are recognised as an intellectual fallacy, which classical realism sets out to correct (Frei, 2016). Classical realism may be considered as a critique of abstract universal values promoted by the liberal school of thought. Rather than focus on norms and values,

or the export of democracy, freedom, and human rights, statesmen should focus on power politics and the achievement of national interests and be realistic in regard to the possibilities and prospects of their foreign policies. Rational policymakers and statesmen should thus accept basic principles of human nature and human behaviour and uphold their primary roles as protectors of the respective states security and interest in an anarchic international system (Frei, 2016; Gewen, 2020).

Classical realism argues that perpetual peace is impossible in the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states. Peace can thus only be achieved when a supranational authority - or world government - can enforce rules and order in an otherwise anarchic international system. While international organisations, such as the United Nations, and particularly the Security Council, introduces an admirable yet insufficient tool to ensure peace, they are considered to be merely a reflection of the underlying structure and current state of affairs, thus a symptom, rather than a cure. While perpetual peace might seem as a distant and somewhat unrealistic dream, this does not mean that the system is in a state of perpetual war. Instead, good policy makers, statesmen, and diplomats may achieve a temporary state of peaceful conditions through the understanding and acceptance of existing rivals and their national interest. Leaders who understands this also understand that the red lines of their adversaries have to be respected if war is to be avoided. Thus, while excellent diplomacy may ensure peace in the short term, radical structural transformation of the international system is required to ensure perpetual peace (Scheuerman, 2010).

Furthermore, it may be argued that classical realism is primarily concerned with the sources and implementation of national powers in international politics, together with the challenges that state leaders encounter in conducting foreign policy. These issues lead scholars to focus on power distributions among individual states, as well as the character of states and their relation to domestic society (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 16).

5.4. Neorealism and the Balance of Power

Neorealism, or structural realism, as it sometimes is referred to, attempts to address key questions of international politics, such as: why do wars occur? Why do states balance against more powerful adversaries? Why is cooperation challenging and fleeting among states? Neorealists concur that international politics is essentially a struggle for power, but they do not attribute this to human nature. In other words, states do not go to war because the humans that governs them are ambitious, egoistic, fearful or envious, but because the structure of the international system is anarchic and provides no security assurances for the individual states. This leads to suspicions and a struggle for security and power, and thus, eventually, conflict (Waltz, 1979: 39-49; Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 17-42).

First defined by Kenneth Waltz, neorealism emphasises the structure of the international system as the main reason for conflict among nations. Through this framework, there exist only two basic political ordering principles; hierarchy, which is associated to domestic politics, and

anarchy, related to international politics. According to Waltz, anarchy largely removes functional differentiation between units. Differences between states is in this sense of capabilities, not function. This approach dismisses ideology, form of government, peacefulness, bellicosity, or any other internal feature of a state, instead, it argues that the sole key element in the study of IR should be the distribution of capabilities. The internal characteristics of the individual states are thus treated as a 'black box' (Waltz, 1979: 96).

Neorealism places much importance on the assumption of states as unitary rational actors. States are unitary in the sense that they are assumed to be ruled by a single and internally coherent government, regardless of their democratic or authoritarian composition. Consequently, neorealism pays limited attention to the internal groups of the state, e.g. political parties, ethnic minorities, non-governmental organisations, etc. Meanwhile, the rational actor assumption is based on an understanding of the state behaving accordingly to principles of rationality related to objectively defined national interests, be it economic or military. Rationality, in other words, is a state's ability to make a reasonable cost-benefit analysis of a given strategy as a mean to maximise their utility (Shadunts, 2016). Because all states conduct their foreign and security policies according to principles of rationality, they behave in similar ways under similar circumstances. Essentially, neorealism argues that state's foreign policies and grand strategies are primarily based on external impulses and shocks to which they react accordingly, thus largely ignoring inner conditions and domestic factors within states (Frei, 2016; Gewen, 2020).

Waltz defined the structure of the international system in terms of two main elements: the organising principle (anarchy) and distribution of capabilities between states (relative power) (Waltz, 1979: 88-98). As the former is preconditioned and static, the latter is the most important analytical variable. According to neorealists, the international system consists of units (states), operating in an anarchic structure of either one great power (unipolarity), two great powers (bipolarity), or multiple great powers (multipolarity). The former is, according to Waltz, considered to be the least durable and most unstable international configuration. This is explained by two distinct factors; first, when one unit achieves a position of dominance, it will eventually misuse the concentrated power, assume too many tasks and responsibilities, and eventually weaken itself sufficiently to be counterbalanced by a single rival or a coalition of rivals. Second, in an anarchic and self-help system, a dominant power will eventually, regardless of its moderation, self-restraint, and forbearance towards other units, be counterbalanced by other mistrustful units worrying about the dominators future behaviour. Power asymmetry will eventually require a response, given that states worry about other states capabilities, and not their perceived intentions (Waltz, 2000: 27-28).

In their struggle to survive in an anarchic international system, states may implement various grand strategies such as balancing, bandwagoning, buck-passing, and strategic hedging. Of these policy options, balancing is the most discussed and influential strategy within realist literature. States balance against opponents through resource mobilisation and armament (internal

balancing), by seeking formal and informal alliances and coalitions (external balancing), or a combination of both. For states to ensure their own survival it is essential that no opponent achieves hegemony, as such, balancing will thus continue to occur (Donnelly, 2013: 37-38; Wivel, 2002: 433-434). While neorealism assures that a new balance of power will occur, it cannot say anything about how long it will take: “In our perspective, the new balance is emerging slowly; in historical perspectives, it will come in the blink of an eye” (Waltz, 2000: 30). Balancing thus occurs regularly and maintains the stability of the international system, as no sole state is able to conquer or submit the rest. Stability, however, does not necessarily imply peace, on the contrary, stability is maintained by means of reoccurring wars that adjust power relations among states. States, however, do not always balance against their strongest competitor, instead, they may purpose an alliance with the source of the threat, a strategy referred to as a bandwagoning. Bandwagoning suggests a strategy of alignment with the greatest power, either for maximising security or power. Strategic hedging refers to a strategy which combines balancing against a threat and bandwagoning with the very same threat, thus adopting cooperative and competitive policies towards a rival simultaneously, depending on the context. Buck-passing, meanwhile, refers to a policy in which a state shifts the burden of deterrence and fighting against the threat to an ally or another rival (Walt, 2013: 17-49; Guzansky, 2015).

Neorealists can be separated in two opposing camps: defensive and offensive realists. At the centre of the distinction between offensive and defensive realism are different assumptions related to the way states tend to behave in the international system, namely what strategies are pursued to achievement of the existential goal of survival. Defensive realists argue that states seek survival and self-preservation through security maximisation, whereas offensive realists content that while states pursue the same goal, they do so through power maximisation. The distinction between maximising security and maximising power is essentially a discussion on whether power is a mean or an end (Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006: 123). According to defensive realists, states should follow a grand strategy aligned with a defensive position, or in other words, seeking to maintain status quo and their current position in the international system. For this reason, states should waive opportunities of expansion, because reaching a position of dominance would urge other states to form alliances in response, and thus, increasing the threat against it. Given the irreducible uncertainty about the intentions of others, security measures taken by one actor, can be perceived by another as threatening, resulting in the latter adopting similar policies. Expanding military capabilities, even for defensive purposes can, in the anarchic structure of international politics, be perceived as threatening, and thus decrease the security of both actors. This reoccurring problem in international relations theory is often referred to as the security dilemma. While all states may essentially strive for security through defensive means, no guarantees can be made on a rival state’s future intentions, thus leading to an enduring spiral of insecurity. By this logic, wars occur as unintentional consequences of states’ security-maximisation policies (Donnelly, 2013: 39-40; Wivel, 2002: 434-35). Offensive realist postulates that all states seek an expansionist and revisionist grand strategy aimed at ensuring their own survival in the international system. The

more power in its hands, the better equipped is the state in ensuring its own survival. International or regional hegemony can thus be understood as the ultimate goal of any capable state – and only in a position of hegemony would a state seek to maintain the status quo. Naturally, as a consequence of revisionist and aggressive foreign policies, wars occur regularly over diverging national interests (Wivel, 2002: 434-435).

Critics of neorealism points to the vagueness and limits of the theoretical framework. Because neorealism is a set of theories of international politics, and not a theory of foreign policy, thus keeping the debate on an overall and structural level, it says nothing about under which conditions states may act outside the postulated model. They hypothesise what effect the structure

	Causal mechanism	States' primary goal:	States' primary strategy:	Primary cause to war:
Defensive realism:	Anarchy and polarity. Outcome.	Security.	Maintain status quo.	Security dilemma.
Offensive realism:	Anarchy and polarity. Outcome.	Security.	Achieve hegemony.	Expansion / revisionist agenda

Figure 1: overview of defensive and offensive realism (Wivel, 2002: 436).

of the international system has on individual states, but nothing on which foreign policies the same states will implement. When the theory’s assumptions deviate from reality, scholars argue that exogenous factors are to blame – by this logic, falsification of the theory is essentially impossible (Ibid.: 436-37). Furthermore, while neorealist theories may be helpful in describing basic mechanisms in international politics through the use of abstractions and simplifications, they may be ill-suited in the explanation of individual events in international politics or a given state’s foreign policies. For these reasons, it may be argued that neorealist theories have no practical use outside academia. One could argue that neorealism provides simple and easy-to-understand theories by using a handful of factors systematically, which enable the theorist to explain important events in world politics, such as world wars. Nonetheless, neorealism is not tailored to explain individual states foreign policy decisions in a given circumstance. For this, another theoretical framework is needed.

5.5. Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism (NcR) is considered to be the most recent, and maybe the less developed, of realisms’ ramifications. Contrary to neorealism, NcR is a theory of foreign policy, rather than a theory of international politics (Rose, 1998). The limits of theories of international politics are clearly exemplified through Waltz’ own admission: “Structurally, we can describe and understand

the pressures states are subject to. We cannot predict how they will react to the pressures without knowledge of their internal dispositions” (Waltz, 1979: 71). Thus, in order to comprehend individual states’ responses to systemic incentives and constraints, a more comprehensive analytical strategy must be implemented. NcR offers such an approach.

NcR self-consciously combines system-level and unit-level explanatory variables (Donnelly, 2013: 45). It does so by operating on three distinctive levels of analysis; a systemic level, a domestic level, and an individual level. At the systemic level, the theory follows the theoretical framework of Waltz’ neorealism, including the emphasis on anarchy, polarity, relative power capabilities, and the pervasive uncertainty and danger of international politics. It differs from its predecessor by broadening the levels of analysis to include domestic factors of the individual states within the international system, such as the political and military institutions, the ruling ideology of the state, the influence of domestic interest groups and non-governmental organisations, etc. Furthermore, by adding the third level of analysis, state leaders and their individual perception of a given political situation, may also be included (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 1-42). As such, NcR can be perceived as an attempt to revitalise the realist school of thought by maintaining the structural insight of neorealism, while complementing it with the practical insight of foreign policy and domestic characteristics of states found in classical realism.

Because the national interests and foreign policies of the state hinge on the governing political elite, these may change over time accordingly to the internal composition of the state (Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006:114). As argued by Randal Schweller: “States often react differently to similar systemic pressures and opportunities, and their responses may be less motivated by systemic-level factors than domestic ones” (Schweller, 2010: 6). Consequently, the predefined national interest of the state and the rational actor assumption loses their relevance and applicability within the NcR theoretical framework. The ‘black box’ of neorealism is thus opened, enabling the analysis to include a range of relevant variables formerly excluded (Donnelly, 2013: 44-45). Proponents of NcR would argue that, over the long term, international political outcomes generally mirror the relative distribution of power among states. In the shorter term, however, the policies pursued by state governments are rarely objectively efficient or predictable based upon purely a systemic analysis (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 4). For example, a revisionist or revolutionary power with a high propensity for risks poses very different challenges than a risk-averse, satisfied, status quo power. Assuming that both will react to structural constraints and incentives and thus execute their foreign policies according to the same principles is a drastic oversimplification (Donnelly, 2013: 41-42).

NcR seeks to explain variations in foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints. Contrary to neorealism, it makes no pretence about explaining broad patterns of systemic and reoccurring outcomes in the international political arena. Thus, a neoclassical realist hypothesis may try to explain foreign policy responses to

systemic imperatives but would be unable to explain long-term systemic consequences of those foreign policy responses (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 18-21).

NcR identifies the state, or the state apparatus, as the governing institutions and individual members of the government of a given country. The term ‘state’ is used as generic term for a variety of independent polities, which differ greatly from one another, depending on the character and nature of said state, such as whether it is democratic or authoritarian, the relation between various governing and political institutions, government branches, and key political parties and politicians. ‘State’ and ‘nation’ are not necessarily synonymous or mutually compatible, as there are plenty of examples of stateless nations, transnational nations, multi-national states, nation-states, etc. (Buzan, 1991: 75-77; Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 6).

Research program	Epistemology and methodology	View of the international system	View of the units	Dependent variable	Underlying causal logic
CLASSICAL REALISM	Inductive theories; philosophical reflection on nature of politics or detailed historical analysis (generally drawn from W. European history)	Somewhat important	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Power distributions or distribution of interests (revisionist vs. status quo) → foreign policy
NEOREALISM	Deductive theories; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods	Very important; inherently competitive and uncertain	Undifferentiated	International political outcomes	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → international outcomes (dependent variable)
NEOCLASSICAL REALISM	Deductive theorizing; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative methods	Important; implications of anarchy are variable and sometimes opaque to decision-makers	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → domestic constraints and elite perceptions (intervening variables) → foreign policy (dependent variable)

Figure 2: overview of three schools of realism (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 20).

Contrary to other theories, e.g. Marxism or liberalism, NcR does not see states as simply aggregating demands from different economic classes or interest groups. Instead, in this top-down approach, it is the ruling elite and its leader(s) which solely defines their perceived national interest and conducts the foreign policy based upon their interpretation of capabilities, relative power, and other states’ intentions and ambitions. This, of course, is always subject to domestic constraints, such as the outcome of an upcoming election, a *coup d’état*, or a successful pressure campaign from powerful interest groups. State autonomy *vis-à-vis* overall society varies over time and across different states, this, in turn, affects whether states respond to international pressure and threats in a timely and efficient manner. This ability relies in part on efficient state-society coordination and domestic coherence. If the state is weakened by internal struggle among various societal groups, its ability to efficiently respond to shifts in the balance of power may be limited or otherwise delayed. NcR can thus be considered useful to explain the significance of the internal variables effect on a given state’s foreign policy (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 26-29).

NcR thus offers a more comprehensive and in-depth analytical approach to previous realist frameworks. Nonetheless, as each step of the analysis brings the researcher closer to the specific and precise, it simultaneously moves the focus away from the parsimonious and generalised analysis found in neorealism (Wivel, 2002: 442-43). Consequently, other IR scholars criticise NcR on epistemological, methodological, and theoretical grounds. The incorporation of unit-level variables, it may be argued, violates the structural logic of neorealism and has inclinations to reductionism. Nonetheless, there is no deductive reason as to why unit-level variables cannot be incorporated while maintaining the causal primacy of structural variables (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 10-23). Arguably, no realist approach is universally superior to another – the appropriate approach depends entirely on the research question at hand. It is the analysts' task, not the theorist's, to determine to which case a particular theoretical approach is applicable.

6. Neoclassical Realism in the Middle East: Geopolitical and Ideological Rivalry

Having accounted for the three main realist schools of thought, with particular emphasis on NcR, it is now time to test the theoretical framework on a specific case, namely the geopolitical and ideological rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The scope of the analysis is thus to test the merits of the NcR approach in a Middle Eastern context. This particular case study has been selected after a careful examination of the existing literature revolving around the interstate rivalry, which suggests that NcR would be able to make significant contributions. This hypothesis is made based on a conception that a purely structural analysis would be unable to account for key aspects and underlying causes for the existence of this rivalry.

This analysis will thus be divided into two sections; firstly, a structural analysis of the balance of power and geopolitical competition between the two states, and how this competition manifests itself as a security dilemma through internal and external balancing measures. While internal balancing refers to the military build-up, external balancing refers to the alliances made and the expansion of external influence in third countries through proxies and non-state allies. Secondly, a domestic analysis of the two countries' internal composition, with particular focus on state ideologies, state structures, sectarianism, and nationalism, and how these factors influence the two states' grand strategies, foreign policies, and threat perceptions.

6.1. Systemic Rivalry and the Balance of Power

In order to analyse the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is first necessary to identify the structural polarity of the international system, as this establishes the primary political conditions in which both states have to manoeuvre in. As argued by Thomas Juneau, "A state's position in the international system, first, shapes the parameters of its foreign policy – its margin of manoeuvre. Structure does not determine what a state's foreign policies can or should be, but it steers it in some directions by suggesting the benefits of certain courses of action while raising the

costs of others” (Juneau, 2019: 42). According to William Wohlforth, the end of the Cold War dramatically ended the bipolar structure and established a United States-led unipolar world order (Wohlforth, 1999). There is widespread support in academia that U.S. influence has steadily declined since, and that multiple developing countries, particularly China and Russia, are growing in both strength and assertiveness (Scobell, 2013; Sørensen, 2015). Whether the current structure is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar is somewhat contested. Most scholars seem to agree that the U.S. currently continues to be powerful enough to maintain a unipolar world order, although the balance of power is shifting, or is adjacent to shift, towards a multipolar order (Schweller & Pu, 2011; Sørensen, 2015; Kamrava, 2018; Wasinger, 2020). This analysis will thus be conducted based on the assumption that the current world order is characterised by U.S.-unipolarity, albeit diminishing relative power.

Since 1991, direct U.S. military presence in the Middle East has had enormous influence in the regional balance of power. Raymond Hinnebusch even described the two decades between 1990 and 2010 as characterised by U.S. hegemony in the Middle East (Hinnebusch, 2004: 204-239). John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have argued that U.S. off and onshore balancing has preserved an artificial balance of power in the region (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). The traditional framework for security in the Persian Gulf region is centred around the U.S.’s role as the provider of security and military assets towards Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf monarchies, in return for reliable and stable access to natural resources, predominately oil. The U.S. maintains a significant presence in the region, with military bases in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Furthermore, besides from direct military presence, the U.S. annually sells weaponry worth billions of dollars to the Gulf monarchies. Between 2018 and 2019, U.S. arm sales increased from 5.8 billion to 14.2 billion USD (Fakhro, 2020; Juneau, 2019: 46). Simultaneously, the U.S. have imposed, to varying degrees, a restrictive sanctions regime upon Iran since 1979, adopted a formal containment policy since the early 1990’s, and has “bases and troops, or at least close military cooperation, with almost every state surrounding Iran (...)” (Juneau, 2019: 46). Regardless, direct U.S. engagement in the region has gradually been reduced beginning from the latter half of the 2000’s, after the failures of the Iraq intervention, a process which have accelerated during the Obama and Trump administrations. The declining role of the U.S. as an off and on-shore balancer in the Middle East has thus created a power vacuum which has yet to be filled, with other international great powers, such as China, Russia, and the European Union and its Member States showing reluctance to engage more than what is necessary to protect their respective primary interests (Kamrava, 2018: 598-604).

With no regional hegemon, and with the gradual disengagement of direct U.S., presence, the Middle East continues to be unstable and dynamic and can be characterised as a multipolar regional (dis)order. This multipolar structure is generated by the four regional great powers: Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Second-tier states include, among others, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen are at the bottom of the hierarchy and heavily influenced by foreign interference (Ibid.). Israel and Saudi Arabia can

be identified as status-quo states, as they are aligned with the U.S. and enjoys strategic and financial benefits from this alignment. Turkey and Iran can be identified as revisionist states, as they pursue assertive foreign policies aimed at expanding regional influence and reshape the prevailing regional power arrangements. This has been particularly evident after the 2010-2011 Arab Spring revolutions, which have destabilised multiple states and created expansionist opportunities in weak and failed states (Ibid.: 604-14). Saudi Arabia's role as a status quo state is demonstrated by its role in the Arab Spring 'counterrevolution', supporting the autocratic regimes of various Arab states – with the exception of Syria – through pre-emptive and counter-revolutionary measures in anticipation of potential spill-over effects (Al-Rasheed, 2012; Echagüe et al., 2013: 35-46).

The identification of the regional great powers is crucial, as “an important issue for a structural theory to address is whether destabilising conditions and events are managed better in multipolar or bipolar systems (...)” and because “In a multipolar world, dangers are diffused, responsibilities unclear, and definitions of interests easily obscured”. Consequently, “the politics of power turns on the diplomacy by which alliances are made, maintained, and disrupted (...) Alliances are made by states that have some but not all of their interests in common. The common interest is ordinarily a negative one: fear of other states” (Waltz, 1988: 620-622). Multipolarity thus defines the nature of specific alliances, as we see it in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in which Saudi Arabia is the dominant actor, or as in the ‘Axis of Resistance’, or ‘Shiite Crescent’, in which Iran is the dominant actor (Yeşilyurt, 2018: 19-21). Multipolarity also enable smaller states to pursue flexible grand strategies, which is exemplified through Qatar's, the UAE's, and Oman's simultaneously balancing and bandwagoning between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Guzansky, 2015), or Bahrain's and the UAE's rapprochement strategy towards Israel (Holland, 2020). The foreign policies of these second-tier states and non-state actors indicate that multipolarity enables minor powers to pursue flexible alignment strategies, which, in turn, destabilises an already delicate balance of power.

6.1.1. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran War in 1980 destabilised the geopolitical regional order of the Middle East and increased security concerns in Saudi Arabia and among other Gulf states. As a result, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981, with the aim to increase coordination, cooperation, and integration of its member states. The establishment of the GCC was based on a set of overlapping geopolitical interests, the monarchical character of the regimes, their Arab origins, their religious ties as Muslims and Sunnis, and their concerns *vis-à-vis* revolutionary, republican, Shia, and non-Arab Iran. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990 exposed the collective and individual weaknesses of the GCC and its members, alongside their ongoing reliance on U.S.-security guarantees (Guzansky, 2015: 235-36).

While the GCC's limited military capabilities and uncertain internal coherence remains as substantial challenges, it has showed some merit in recent years. Significant steps have been taken towards formal economic integration; the GCC's successfully assisted the al-Khalifa regime in suppressing protesters in Bahrain; and there has been, albeit with limited success, some military cooperation in Yemen. While in-depth cooperation within the GCC remains limited, it may expand in-breadth through the proposed accession of Jordan and Morocco (Echagüe et al., 2013: 15-24).

Furthermore, there exists substantial foreign policy incoherence between the individual GCC member states, which manifests itself as a collective action problem and weakens the alliance's ability to act as a united bloc *vis-à-vis* Iran. For example, multiple GCC states are arguably executing policies of strategic hedging, which entails balancing against, while simultaneously bandwagoning with, Iran. According to Yoal Guzansky, smaller states may exploit a sphere of manoeuvrability on a continuum between total defection and full cooperation, in order to maximise individual gains and security at the expense of the alliance's long-term strategic interests (Guzansky, 2015: 232). Because states cannot be absolute certain as to the true intentions, full commitments, and exact capabilities of their allies, and because states' national interests vary over time and are rarely entirely identical, strategic hedging can be perceived as a strategy to avoid full commitment to either side of the conflict. Thus, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE all engage, to varying degrees, in strategic hedging towards Iran and Saudi Arabia. The degree to which these states pursue strategic hedging varies depending on numerous factors; including the geographical proximity towards Iran and Saudi Arabia; economic interdependence and bilateral economic ties; natural resources exploitation in the Persian Gulf; ethnic and religious minorities; etc. (Ibid.: 235-44). Thus, the junior GCC states need to balance between avoiding direct confrontation with Iran, against concerns over Saudi hegemony on the Arabian Peninsula. Qatar, in particular, has pursued a delicate strategy of balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while simultaneously adopting foreign policies aiming at maximising influence abroad. While the combination of opportunism, ambition, and strategic manoeuvring – backed by soft power capabilities – enables Qatar to significantly punch above its weight, this strategy also comes at a significant cost (Ibid.: 238-40). In 2017, for example, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE sanctioned Qatar by enforcing a blockade and closing the Saudi-Qatari border, demanding, among other things, that Qatar curtailed cooperation with Iran and severed ties with non-state actors in third countries that they considered to unaligned with the GCC's strategic interests (Yeşilyurt, 2018: 32-34). Foreign policy incoherence within the GCC poses great challenges to Saudi Arabia, which has been unsuccessful in uniting the Gulf monarchies from a loose federative confederation to a single entity, or to a significant defensive military alliance able to counter-balance Iranian capabilities (Ibid.: 244-46).

A separate point of incoherence among GCC states exists in terms of their relations with the remaining regional powers, namely Israel and Turkey. In terms of former, relations between Israel and Arab/Muslim states have long been antagonistic and predominately characterised by the Israel-Palestine conflict (Walt, 2013: 51). Yet, the GCC states have no unified stance towards

Israel, which is exemplified by the recent ‘Abraham Accords’; the UAE’s and Bahrain’s (later also Sudan’s and Morocco’s) reconciliation and normalisation of relations with Israel (Holland, 2020). While these events cannot solely be attributed as a counter-balancing measure against Iran’s expanded influence, particularly in the case of Sudan and Morocco, overlapping geopolitical and economic interests are arguably the primary reason. The Abraham Accords can be considered as a natural extension and an official formalisation of the pre-existing informal security arrangements between the GCC states and Israel, which included the covert expansion of security cooperation in areas such as cyber security and intelligence-sharing. Furthermore, this rapprochement can be perceived as a strategic diversification of security ties towards regional and international powers. The UAE, for example, managed to extract key military concessions, predominately access to the state-of-the-art American military equipment (Fakhro, 2020). Thus, improved relations with Israel seems to be equivalating improved relations with the U.S., which in turn increases strategic advantages in the geopolitical arena. Regardless, improving Arab-Israeli relations also comes with challenges. On one hand, normalised relations between the Arab world and Israel exposes the disconnection between Iran and the region it seeks to dominate, while on the other hand, it adds fuel to Iran’s ideological and sectarian propaganda towards the exploitation of residual support for the Palestinian cause in the Muslim world’s public opinion (Maloney, 2020). While structural incentives suggest that the GCC states would benefit from closer collaboration with Israel, it remains unclear whether Saudi-Israeli relations will be formally normalised in a foreseeable future. The U.S. is currently maintaining its commitment to protect Israel’s comparative ‘qualitative military edge’, but the proliferation of high-tech weapon systems to all GCC states would de-facto end this advantage. Whether the remaining GCC states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, chooses to normalise relations with Israel thus rely on whether the U.S. will follow through on the apparent commitment to sell state-of-the-art military equipment, such as the F-35 combat aircraft (Leaf & Stroul, 2020).

A third point of foreign policy incoherence among the GCC states is to be found in their relations with Turkey, particularly in terms of Qatar. GCC-Turkish relations deteriorated with the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the subsequent revolutions, in which Turkey held a pro-revolutionary stance towards Syria, Egypt, and Libya, conflicting with the GCC counter-revolutionary position. Contrary to the GCC stance, a strong alignment emerged between Qatar and Turkey, both favouring and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated movements, which both Saudi Arabia and the UAE designates as a terrorist organisation. While Turkey saw an opportunity to expand foreign influence by sponsoring the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar considered it a way to gain autonomy from Saudi dominance (Yeşilyurt, 2018: 20-27). Turkish-Qatari relations have since deepened, with growing economic interdependence and military cooperation, exemplified by the establishment of a Turkish military base in Doha (Ibid: 28). Meanwhile, Turkish-Saudi relations have deteriorated, exemplified by their support for conflicting opposition movements in the Syrian Civil War (Ibid: 29). Regardless, these tensions eased to a large extent in 2015, when King Salman bin Abdulaziz ascended the Saudi throne and pursued an increasingly

proactive containment policy against Iran, aiming at establishing a ‘Sunni bloc’ as a counterbalancing measure (Ibid: 30). This can be perceived as an unintended consequence of Iran’s softening of relations with the international community in 2015, partly due to Iran’s significant contribution to suppress the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria, partly to the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) – which restricted Iran’s development of nuclear capabilities in exchange for sanctions relief (Ibid: 30).

Saudi Arabia’s dominant position within the GCC, its covert collaboration with Israel, and its efforts to establish a ‘Sunni bloc’ with Turkey can all be perceived as part of a grand strategy of external balancing against Iran. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has made significant efforts to increase its own military capabilities, or in other words, to pursue a policy of ‘internal balancing’ (Walt, 2013: 149). The internal balancing strategy relies heavily on the importation of arms, predominately from the U.S. From 2009-13 to 2014-18, Saudi arms import increased by 192%, making it the world’s largest importer in the latter period. These purchases included military aircrafts, missile defence systems, tanks, armoured vehicles, military vessels, and short-ranged ballistic missiles (Wezeman et al., 2018: 11). Despite the substantial efforts made to increase its military capabilities, the Saudi armed forces inability to succeed in Yemen demonstrates the limitations of this strategy. Furthermore, the deteriorating reputation of the Saudi regime, which has led to international criticism and bi-partisan scepticism towards Saudi Arabia in Washington, may result in a reduction in its ability to procure U.S.-produced arms, thus weakening a significant comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* Iran (Sachs & Wittes, 2020).

The Arab Spring revolutions were of relative disadvantage to Saudi Arabia, which saw historical allies in authoritarian regimes collapse in multiple states. Significant protests in Bahrain and Yemen compelled Riyadh to intervene militarily. Financial support was offered to Bahrain, Egypt, and Oman, among others. Overall, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies held a firm counter-revolutionary position, shaped predominately by the need to contain the revolutions and Iranian influence in the region. In terms of the Middle East region, only in Syria, an Iranian ally since 1979, did Riyadh support opposition movements to topple the regime and to “win Syria back to the Arab fold” (al-Rasheed, 2012), exemplifying the hypocrisy of supporting civil unrest and democratic movements only when considered beneficial to the national interests and to the geopolitical balance of power (Salloukh, 2013; Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 167). With the ambition to remove the Assad-regime from power, “Riyadh financed and supported Free Syrian Army groups and turned a blind eye to Salafi calls, sometimes aired from the kingdom’s own Salafi satellite channels, for the mobilisation of Salafi-jihadi fighters into the Syrian battlefield”, thus combining soft and hard power capabilities to support proxies with mutually compatible short-term interests (Salloukh, 2013: 41).

6.1.2. Iran and the ‘Axis of Resistance’

Contrary to Saudi Arabia’s and the GCC’s cooperative relations with the U.S., U.S.-Iranian relations have long been characterised by suspicion and antagonism. While U.S.-Iranian relations

prior to 1979 can be considered as amicable and cooperative, these deteriorated dramatically as a result of the revolution and the subsequent Iranian embarkment on a sectarian and nationalistic policy agenda aimed at ensuring regime survival, self-reliance, sovereignty, and regional influence, to which the U.S. responded with a prolonged sanctions regime and by supporting Iran's regional rivals (Juneau, 2019). A former ally, Iran was now perceived as a threat against the regional order, against U.S. presence in the Middle East, against the security of Israel, and against the free flow of oil through the Persian Gulf. From an Iranian perspective, the presence of Western powers in the Middle East was overshadowed by the immediate threat posed by neighbouring Iraq, which in 1980 took advantage of the destabilisation of revolutionary Iran to invade militarily. While the invasion proved unsuccessful and the war ended with a return to the previous status quo, geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Iraq continued until the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baath-regime in 2003.

With the threat from Iraq expunged, Iran could redirect its attention towards maximising security and regional influence by counterbalancing against Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the U.S. (Salloukh, 2013). While Saudi Arabia and the junior GCC states have access to state-of-the-art military equipment, Iran's ability to import high-tech arms as part of an internal balancing mechanism is severely limited. Decades of international sanctions have restricted Iran's ability to maintain, modernise, and increase military capabilities through foreign procurement, resulting to a substantial relative disadvantage in conventional capabilities. The sanctions regime imposed upon Tehran has a dual effect: it directly restricts its ability to (legally) procure arms, while simultaneously limiting economic development and thus the financial means necessary to invest in weaponry (DIA, 2019: 30 Juneau, 2019: 47). While Saudi Arabia was the world's largest arms importer in 2014-2018, Iran accounted for a mere 0.9% of arms import to the Middle East in the same period (Wezeman et al., 2018: 11-12). Consequently, the regime has relied upon illegal arms import, domestic production, and innovation. Recognising its relatively limited conventional capabilities *vis-à-vis* the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, Iran "has prioritized the development of defensive capabilities that emphasise asymmetric tactics to protect the country and the regime" (DIA, 2019: 12). These defensive capabilities function as deterrents against conventional conflicts and as means to advance regional security interests. Overall, "Iran's deterrence is largely based on three core capabilities: ballistic missiles capable of long-range strikes, naval forces capable of threatening the navigation in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and unconventional operations using partners and proxies abroad" (Ibid.: 23).

Of these three core capabilities, Iran's missile force is of particular concern for its rivals, as it remains capable of striking targets across the region. The perceived threat is exacerbated by the possibility of Iran achieving nuclear capabilities in a foreseeable future. While Iran considers the potential development of nuclear capabilities as a bargaining chip, as a deterrent, and as an insurance policy for the survival of the regime, regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel, perceives it as an existential threat. The JCPoA intended to curb Iran's nuclear programme



Figure 3: Iran's regional relations and disruption in the Persian Gulf (The Economist, 2019).

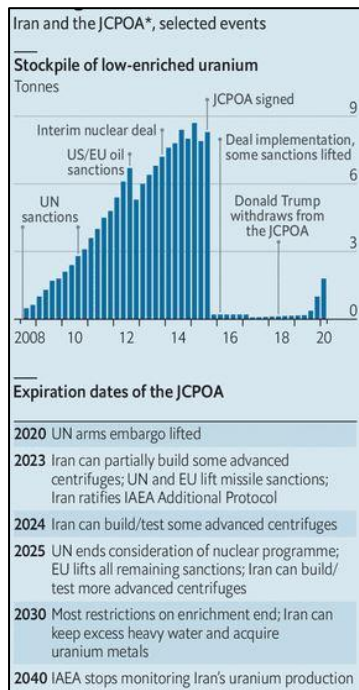


Figure 4: JCPOA timeline (The Economist, 2020)

in return for sanctions relief, but included no restrictions on Iran's missile programme, disruption of navigation in the Gulf, or interference in third countries, raising criticism and resistance from the U.S.'s regional allies. With the U.S.'s withdrawal from the agreement in 2018, and with the implementation of increased sanctions as part of a 'maximum pressure' strategy, Iran responded by accelerating its nuclear programme, disrupting navigation in the Gulf, and striking Saudi Arabia with drones and missiles (Ibid.: 19-21; Mearsheimer, 2019; The Economist, 2020).

As a result of Iran's political isolation in the region, attempts have been made to expand influence and 'export the revolution' through proxies and other non-state allies in order to "carve out a sphere of influence known as the 'Shiite Crescent'", or an 'Axis of Resistance'" (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 1). These efforts were facilitated by the destabilisation of Iraq post-2003 and by the Arab Spring revolutions. In this context, Iran has widened and deepened its support to Syria, its sole state ally, and various non-state actors, notably in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. This policy serves a dual purpose; on one hand, it can be considered as a strategy of asymmetrical balancing, while on the other hand, it poses direct security threats to rival regimes, notably Israel and Saudi Arabia, which in turn functions as a deterrent for direct military engagement against Iran. Arguably, the political isolation and containment of Iran has compelled the regime to seek alternative counter-balancing measures by engaging in strategic partnerships with state and non-state actors alike (Ibid.: 1-20).

Iran's asymmetrical counterbalancing strategy can be considered relatively successful: in Syria, the Assad regime relies on direct and indirect Iranian support to suppress revolutionary movements, enforcing the pre-existing Damascus-Tehran axis, which consist of Iran's sole regional state alliance, but which increasingly resembles a patron-client relationship (Ibid.: 167-201). Support for Hezbollah – a militia-cum-political party – has enforced Iranian influence in Lebanon and Syria and serves as a strategic deterrent against Israel (The Economist, 2017; Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 21-56). This is also the case for Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the West Bank, which receives Iranian support in the struggle against Israel, regardless of ideological and sectarian differences, exemplifying that geopolitical considerations overshadow ideological

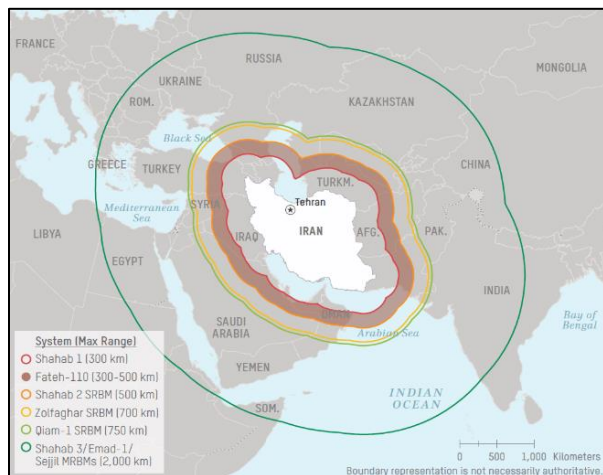


Figure 5: Iranian ballistic missile range (DIA, 2019).

ones (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 57-94). The Iraqi political landscape is also heavily influenced by multiple Iranian proxies and other non-state allies, either directly through the political establishment, or indirectly through armed militias detached from the armed forces of Iraq. Significant Iranian influence in Iraq has dragged the country deep into Tehran's sphere of influence, while successfully suppressing Saudi Arabian proxies and allies. Furthermore, Iran's proximity to Iraq and its significant military influence in the country poses a constant threat to U.S. military presence in the country (Ibid.:

127-65). As far as to Yemen, Iran has supported the Houthi movement in ousting the pro-Saudi government in Sanaa, thus posing a direct military threat in Saudi Arabia's backyard. The influx of Iranian weapons, attacks on Saudi soil, and the disruption of maritime traffic around the Yemeni Red Sea-coast compelled Saudi Arabia and the UAE to intervene militarily in favour of the Yemeni government. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have spent billions of dollars in the effort to suppress the Houthis, albeit with limited success. While the UAE has withdrawn most of its troops from the war, Saudi Arabia remains committed to protect its border to Yemen (Walsh & Kirkpatrick, 2019). In comparison, Iranian support to the Houthi's can reasonably be perceived as a low-risk and low-cost engagement with a high strategic output (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 214-220). Most significantly, by engaging directly and indirectly in conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Iran has successfully established a geopolitical land corridor to the Mediterranean and to Israel, thus further increasing its regional influence and deterrents against Israel (Chulov, 2016; Mabon: 2018).

While Iran's proxy strategy has proved successful in increasing Iranian influence in the region, in straining the resources of its regional competitors, and in serving as deterrents against military engagement directed towards Iran, the recipients of Iranian support should not be considered as Tehran's 'extended arm'. These proxy organisations vary tremendously in size, organisational structure, strength, and in terms of their individual scope and ambitions. While Hezbollah was founded in direct collaboration with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Lebanon, the Houthi movement and its dispute with the Yemeni government stems from indigenous grievances that long precedes Iranian interference in the country (Stark, 2020). As such, the client-patron relationships between Tehran and its proxies should be considered as a temporary alliance of convenience based on mutually compatible interest, predominately common foes. Thus, incoherence between Iran and the various proxies are abound. In Iraq, for example, where Iranian influence have penetrated both state institutions and parts of civil society, local actors pursue their own interests which occasionally conflicts with Tehran's political agenda

(Young, 2018; Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 127-165). As interests vary over time, neither Iran, nor its proxies, should consider the current partnerships as stable long-term alliances. Consequently, Iran's regional influence relies on the mutually compatible interests of Tehran and its proxies, and the latter's continuing dependence on foreign support.

6.1.3. Sub-conclusion

This section has accounted for the nature of the multipolar (dis)order of the Middle East, with particular focus on the balance of power and geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This rivalry manifests itself as a security dilemma which results in external and internal balancing measures. In recent years, the balance of power has shifted dramatically, causing increased friction in the geopolitical arena. The gradual disengagement and declining role of the U.S. as an off- and onshore balancer in the Middle East have created a power vacuum which has yet to be filled, while simultaneously increasing the security concerns and threat perceptions of traditional U.S. allies that are dependent on American security guarantees. Furthermore, the collapse of long-term authoritarian regimes in multiple Arab states have altered the previous status-quo and opened new battle theatres, creating both expansionist opportunities and additional threat perceptions. Arguably, these shifts in the balance of power can be perceived as beneficial to Iran's position in the geopolitical arena of the Middle East. Iran and Saudi Arabia are consequently becoming increasingly entangled in a security dilemma, wherein measures that increases the security of the former, decreases the security of the latter, and vice versa. In this zero-sum game, it is impossible to determine whether increased military capabilities, new alliances, or increased influence in third countries are obtained for maximising security or maximising offensive capabilities. Consequently, uncertainty, anarchy, and self-help compel states to assume the worse, resulting in a destructive spiral of security competition, particularly in third countries.

While neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran would benefit from a direct military confrontation, escalating regional tension increases the possibility of miscalculations and overreactions. In this context, understanding the red lines of the opponent becomes critical. Under its revisionist agenda, Iran will likely continue to walk the line between expanding regional influence and establishing deterrents on one hand, without becoming assertive enough to increase unity among its opponents on the other hand. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia will continue attempting to contain Iranian influence by aligning itself with regional powers with mutually compatible threat perceptions. To use the words of Kenneth Waltz, "The lessons of history would seem to be clear: In international politics, success leads to failure. The excessive accumulation of power by one state or coalition of states elicits the opposition of others" (Waltz, 1988: 625). Uninterested in direct military confrontations, third country conflicts will likely continue in the foreseeable future. The successes of these strategies will depend upon a variety of factors, including U.S. engagement in the region; coherence among the GCC member states; the degree of internal balancing achieved; and the outcome of proxy conflicts in third countries.

A structural explanation of the power competition in the Middle East can go a long way, although it does not perform perfectly. On one hand, the formation of untraditional alliances between Gulf monarchies and Israel, or between Iran and Sunni fundamentalist non-state actors, exemplifies the fact that *realpolitik* overrules religious, ethnic, and ideological identities. Both states have thus crossed sectarian lines in their effort to balance and counterbalance. While sectarianism and nationalism play a pivotal role in the conflict, one must differentiate between means and the ends. This demonstrates that structural incentives and constraints, combined with the external pressures that states react upon, are the primary driving forces of state behaviour in the international sphere of politics.

Regardless, a purely structural analysis also leaves significant blind spots and includes considerable fault lines. Martin Beck puts it in a nutshell: “(...) [neo]realism also faces severe problems, particularly as it can hardly explain why the two strongest of the four most powerful actors – the USA and Israel – ally with one of the two weaker ones – Saudi Arabia – against another of the two weaker ones: Iran” (Beck, 2020: 88). This alliance pattern makes sense when considering that states balance against what is perceived as the primary threat, although from a structural point of view, Iran hardly poses a direct threat to the territorial integrity or regime survival of these states. Neorealism is unable to account for why Saudi Arabia and Iran or Israel and Iran consider one another as existential threats. To understand this dynamic of threat perceptions, the analysis must include domestic factors outside of the neorealist framework.

6.2. Domestic Level of Analysis

NcR argues that the assumption of states being coherent unitary actors is inherently flawed. Threat perceptions, and states’ response to these threats, cannot exclusively be understood based on structural variables and relative power capabilities. Instead, it suggests that in order to fully understand the behaviour of a state, it is necessary to consider the importance of relevant unit-level variables, particularly those which can be perceived as threats to domestic stability, security, and regime survival. Which analytical variables are included depends on the research question at hand and the context in which the question is asked, thus making NcR an ad hoc theoretical framework.

The following section will argue that geopolitical rivalries and power politics are not the sole driving force of regional competition, but that incompatible and conflicting ideological differences exacerbates internal and external security dilemmas. In the context of the ideological rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the following intervening variables are identified as pivotal: ethno-national and religious identities, the ideological expression of the state, and the relation between aforementioned identities and the state. These variables are included to supplement and to challenge the neorealist approach and the Eurocentric view of Westphalian nation-states as unitary actors in a Middle Eastern context. The core argument is that incongruence between ethnic and sectarian lines on one hand, and state boundaries on the other, are manipulated by rival states

for political means, thus heavily influencing the regional security environment and exacerbating third country conflicts and threat perceptions.

The subsequent section is structured in the following order: the first part will analyse the ruling ideology and power structure of the Saudi monarchy, particularly its reliance on religious legitimacy, and how this in turn affects the state's foreign and domestic policies. A similar approach is implemented in the second part, which will analyse ethno-national and religious identities within Iran in the context of the state ideology and domestic power structures, and how this affects the foreign policies of the regime. The sub-conclusion will argue that the above-mentioned unit-level variables heavily influences both states' foreign policies decisions and grand strategies, which in turn exacerbates geopolitical competition with mutually incompatible ideological factors.

6.2.1. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The history of the state-building process of Saudi Arabia is a history of foreign occupation, tribal rivalry, internal feuding, and civil war. Between 1744 and 1932, the House of Saud made several attempts to consolidate power and establish a unified and independent kingdom in the Arabian Peninsula. This long-lasting struggle for power consolidation ended in 1932, when Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud – commonly known as Ibn Saud – successfully unified the political entities of the region through means of subduing rivals, either through the use of military force, or by inter-tribal marriages. As argued by Madawi al-Rasheed, the unification of the tribal-political entities of the Arabian Peninsula was not a result of a broad public movement, but rather “a state imposed on people without a historical memory of unity or national heritage” (al-Rasheed, 2002: 3). The period that followed was characterised by the Al Saud dynasty's efforts to overcome regional and tribal differences polemic to the ideas of national unity and the establishment of a centralised government (Mabon, 2013: 81). By declaring themselves the protectors of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the Al Saud dynasty claimed internal and external legitimacy as the self-declared rightful leaders of Saudi Arabia and of the Muslim world. Adhering to the conservative Islamic creed of Wahhabism, the Al Saud dynasty would implement a state religion based on a strict interpretation of Islamic scripture and a legal system stemming from Sharia law, thus repressing other religions and conflicting interpretations of Islam (Ibid.: 79-82).

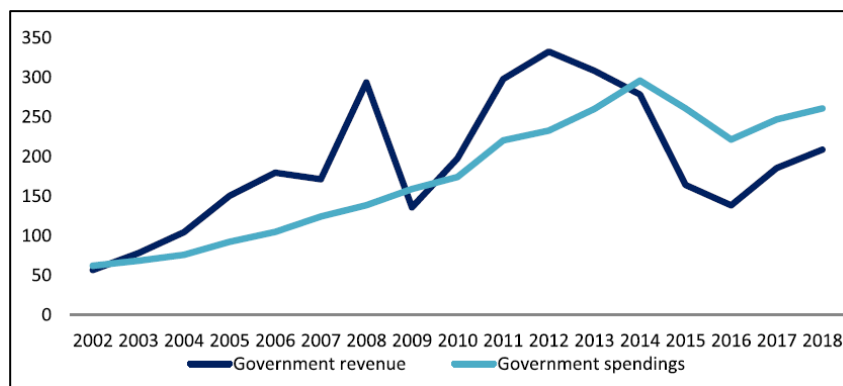
Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy consistently ruled by members of the House of Al Saud, particularly the direct descendants of the founding king, Ibn Saud. While the second in line to the throne is the crown prince, pervasive succession disputes are common given the large numbers of male descendants with legitimate claims to the throne. This was particularly evident with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's consolidation of power in 2017, which saw the detainment of a range of perceived opponents, including family members, clerics, and intellectuals (Mabon, 2018). The House of Al Saud draws political legitimacy to rule through predominately three elements: first, the use of Islamic rhetoric and values, which is exemplified through the official title of “King (...), Protector of the Two Holy Places. The Custodian of the Two Holy

Mosques” (Mabon, 2013: 87), the use of Sharia law in the judicial system, and the alliance with the Wahhabi clerical establishment. Second, the Al Saud’s pivotal importance to the founding of the Saudi state in 1932, combined with the unbroken line of succession of Ibn Saud’s male descendants, which provides the monarchy with legitimacy through tradition and continuity. Third, the successful development and modernisation of the Saudi state and society, which predominately can be attributed to vast revenues produced with the export of natural resources, thus substantially elevating the standard of living of the Saudi population (Ibid.: 80-89; Faudot, 2019). The government of Saudi Arabia is unicameral, consisting solely of the King and his cabinet, appointed by and exclusively responsible to the monarch. The king and his cabinet are responsible for the formation and implementation of all domestic and foreign policies of the state. Political parties are non-existent in Saudi Arabia, and any organisation with a political agenda, whether foreign or domestic, is considered illegal and vigorously oppressed (Mabon, 2013: 82-83).

In 2020, the country’s population was estimated to consist of 34.1 million people, of which 38% were foreigners. Saudis are a relatively homogenous people, with 90% of the national population ethnic Arabs and the remaining 10% Afro-Asians. The vast majority of the population, 85-90% according to official numbers, adheres to the Sunni Islamic faith, while the remaining 10-15% are Shia Muslims. Islam is the official religion of the state, as enshrined by law, and religious expressions inconsistent with the government-sanctioned Sunni Islamic Wahabi interpretation of Islam is restricted (CIA, 2020a; Mabon, 2013: 80). Majority of the Shia Muslim population lives in the oil-rich Eastern Province, bordering the Persian Gulf, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority have historically been persecuted, discriminated, and excluded from influence and the benefits of economic development. The state’s oppression of the Shia minority is in part a result of the alliance between the House of Al Saud and the Wahhabi clerical establishment, which considers the Shia faith as heretical, consequently criminalising the practicing of the religion in public. Saudi Shias also face suspicion for their alleged relations with foreign states, particularly Iran, thus further straining relations between the religious minority and the state. Perceptions of Saudi Shias having sympathy towards and an ideological and sectarian connection to Iran, thus potentially functioning as a ‘fifth column’, is considered as a significant threat to the stability of the regime (Mabon, 2013: 121-31). As argued by Mabon, “It is widely held across the region that the Shii population in Saudi Arabia is torn between loyalty to the Kingdom and loyalty to Iran (...)” (Ibid.: 122). Although organised opposition is limited, the Saudi regime is concerned that Shia opposition groups, such as Hizballah al-Hijaz, may receive financial and ideological support from Iran, in order to destabilise the regime or disturb the production of oil in the Eastern Province (Ibid: 122). The resolute response of Saudi Arabia and the GCC to the 2011 uprising in neighbouring Bahrain, where majority of the population are Shia, but the ruling regime is Sunni, clearly exemplifies the perceived threat of civil unrest from a marginalised religious group, and the potential cross-border spill-over effect (Ibid: 139).

The Wahhabi clergy, or *ulama*, of Saudi Arabia plays a pivotal role in the political, judicial, and moral endorsement of the policies of the regime, particularly when sensitive or controversial

issues are at stake. In fact, the monarchs of Saudi Arabia have on several occasions requested the *ulama*'s legal opinion on particular policies, yet arguably with the intention to secure the political ends of the regime and to defuse or contain religious radicalism. A superior example of this is arguably the *ulama*'s approbation of King Fahd's decision to invite foreign non-Muslim troops to Saudi Arabia, as part of the liberation of Kuwait during the Gulf War of 1990-1991. While this policy was considered necessary to counter a potential Iraqi invasion, it exacerbated religious tensions and growing domestic Islamic opposition (Jones, 1995: 31-41). The relationship between the monarchy and the *ulama* is essentially a quid pro quo recognition of the political legitimacy of the former and the religious supremacy of the latter. Having said this, it is important to note that the influence of the *ulama* does not originate from their religious prestige or theological knowledge, but rather from their appointment - and dismissal - by the ruling monarch. As argued by Joseph Nevo, the religious ruling of the *ulama* does not always reflect theological considerations, but rather a desire to maintain their prestigious position in Saudi society (Nevo, 1996: 42). Nonetheless, the *ulama* remains vital to the regime's legitimacy, which in turn compels the regime to balance between appeasing religious zealots, while simultaneously implementing



Graphic 6: government revenue and spending, in USD billions (Faudot, 2019: 97)

domestic and foreign policies that are perceived as necessary to the survival of the regime, but which can draw criticism for contradicting religious dogma. Since 2017, when Mohammad bin Salman was appointed as Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia have embarked on what is presented as an increasingly reformist agenda of a 'more tolerant' interpretation of Islam. This policy agenda was backed by an intention to repress members of the *ulama* opposed to the reforms, in part through anti-terror legislation aimed at suppressing extremist ideologies (Mabon, 2018: 57). While the Crown Prince has received praise for several reformist policies, including the 2017 decision to lift the ban on women's right to drive, which coincided with the arrest of multiple ultra-conservative clerics, it may be argued that the intention behind these reforms are to improve the international image of the state and appease domestic calls for reform, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Moreno, 2017; The Economist, 2017).

With the discovery of large deposits of natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, Saudi Arabia has become a prime example of a rentier state, relying almost exclusively on the

export of these natural resources to balance its expenditures (Faudot, 2019). With a dramatic increase in state revenues in the latter half of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia managed to ensure rapid development of the country's infrastructure, health care system, education system, and military capabilities. The relation between the Saudi state and the population can in this sense be perceived as an informal social contract, in which the state provides a long range of high-quality social services and low or non-existent taxes, in exchange for the absent representation of citizens in the political system. While the expansion of the state's budget gave the Al Saud dynasty the ability to lavishly purchase patronage and provide high-quality social services to the people, this economic and social development also had unintended consequences, including high unemployment rates among a well-educated, young and growing population. Furthermore, the economic development that followed the discovery of oil also resulted in the immigration of both Muslim and non-Muslim foreigners, whose labour is required in both skilled and unskilled workplaces, but which also resulted in social, ethnic, and religious tensions among parts of the population. The economic development and the subsequent urbanisation, combined with the state's detribalisation policies, significantly contributed to the gradual subjection of the tribes' societal and political influence (Mabon, 2013: 83-84, 142-53). Furthermore, the Saudi state has been able to use its economic might to stave off domestic dissent, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, which triggered a USD 130 billion welfare package that included an increase in public jobs, infrastructural investments, and a rise of the minimum wage (Mabon, 2018: 55). Naturally, the systematic appeasement of public unrest through increased welfare spending is unsustainable over the long-term, considering the combined economic effects of fluctuating oil prices, questionable endurance of long-term demands, and the limited remanence of oil supplies, thus compelling the Saudi monarchy to pursue policies of economic diversification (Ibid.: 54-58; Faudot, 2019).

The ruling ideology of the state, the influence of orthodox Wahhabi clerics, the rapid economic development in the 20th century, the security dependency on foreign states, and the presence of a substantial religious minority, have significantly exacerbated tensions between societal groups within Saudi Arabia. As argued by Mabon, Saudi Arabia is a land of contradictions, with substantial tensions between Islamic authority on one hand, and the social and economic transformation and modernisation on the other. Globalisation, modernisation, foreign cultural influence, the presence of non-Muslim immigrants, and Saudi Arabia's reliance on Western partners for security and commodity imports, are all in stark contrast to the dogmas of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Additional sources of tensions originate from the state's relationships with the United States, a pivotal security partner, including the presence of American troops in the Middle East in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular (Mabon, 2013: 87-89; 114-131). The state's balancing between conservative and traditional Islamic values and orthodoxy on one hand, and modernisation and globalisation on the other, has also resulted in violent events within the Kingdom. These incidents include the seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca in 1979 by Islamic fundamentalists, which demonstrated the dissatisfaction of some religious zealots

towards the ‘moral laxity’ and ‘degeneration’ of the House of Al Saud (Ibid.: 115). Another example is the state’s ambiguous relations with foreign and domestic terrorist organisations, particularly al-Qaeda (Ibid.: 119-29). This dichotomy is described by Madawi al-Rasheed as a “doubled-edged sword”, in which the monarchy uses Islam as a tool to legitimise their rule and political agenda, while simultaneously inviting critics of the regime to question whether Islamic principles and values are adequately incorporated in the policies of the regime (al-Rasheed, 1996; 371). It can be concluded that while the Al Saud’s utilisation of a conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam has been successful in claiming legitimacy to rule and ensure an unbroken line of succession, it has simultaneously caused internal tensions and friction with Sunni Islamic fundamentalists, an alienated Shia minority, and growing public demands for political reforms, thus potentially threatening the monarchy’s grip on power (Mabon, 2013: 87-89; Moreno, 2017; Mabon, 2018). As a mean to limit criticism and ensure domestic stability, the regime combines policies of accommodation and coercion (Jones, 1995: 37). Overall, the challenges that the monarchy faces in 2020 are similar to those faced in 1990: first, the regime must continue to appease Islamic zealots; second, it must continue to provide costly high-level welfare services to the general public; and third, to count on that its international allies, particularly the U.S., will continue to ensure its security at the geopolitical level. The success of these contradictory policies will rely on the international supply and demand for oil, the regime’s ability to diversify the economy, the success of its balancing strategy between conservative Islamic values and modernisation, and the commitment of its allies to ensure external security and regional stability.

6.2.2. Islamic Republic of Iran

Historians could draw a line from present-day Iran to the founding of the Persian Empire by the Mede tribe in approximately 700 B.C. It goes without saying that this is far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the following section will briefly summarise the historical context starting from the end of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) and the founding of modern Iran through the 1979 revolution. Furthermore, it will provide an analysis of the political system governing Iran, the ideological narrative used to legitimise the state in its current form, the societal connection with relevant ethnic and religious groups, and how these factors intervene with the foreign policies of the state.

Farideh Farhi argued that Iranian identity is “Janus-faced”, building upon the idea of being the children of both Cyrus the Great and the Prophet Mohammed (Farhi: 2005). By claiming legitimacy through the historical boundaries established by the Persian Empire, many Iranians perceives their country to be in a state of ‘natural disposition’, thus in stark contrast to the neighbouring Arab states carved out by Western colonial powers (Mabon, 2013: 92-96). Nonetheless, Iran has been subject to influence and interference from multiple foreign powers, including the Ottoman, Russian and British empires, and later by the United Kingdom and the United States. Historically, foreign interests in Iran have centred around Iran’s important geopolitical location at the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, as bridge between South and Central

Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, and for its significant natural resources, predominately oil. The strategic importance of Iran makes it a natural contender for regional hegemony, but has also resulted in significant foreign interference in the form of military invasions, natural resource exploitation, and as multiple foreign-sponsored *coup d'états*, which remains as traumas in the national consciousness of modern Iran and as a nationalist rallying point (Abrahamian, 2008: 97-123).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was in part a result of the people's discontent of the *quid pro quo* relationship between the Pahlavi dynasty on one hand, and the United Kingdom and the United States on the other. The Pahlavi's reliance on external actors for security and economic assurances was in this light in stark contrast to the Iranian perception of being a sovereign nation in a state of 'natural disposition'. While large sections of the population benefitted from the rapid economic development of the 'White Revolution' in the years 1963-1979, significant parts of the people felt increasingly disenfranchised by the authoritarian nature of the state, the brutality of the security forces, the rampant inequality, and the excessive and Western lifestyle of the Shah, alongside the monarchy's aforementioned reliance on foreign security guarantees (Ibid.: 123-54; Mabon, 2013: 93-96). The monarchy's perceived dependency on external actors, particularly the U.S., induced the opposition into referring to the Shah as "the American king" (Pollack, 2004: 121). These key drivers would gradually lead to the immense street protests that ended the "53-year-old [Pahlavi] dynasty and the 2.500-year-old [Iranian] monarchy (Abrahamian, 2008: 162).

While the protests were carried out by a broad range of demonstrators, it was eventually Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini and his followers who best managed to take advantage of the circumstances and manoeuvre themselves into a position of power. In the immediate aftermath of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's abdication, and in the struggle between the ideals of an Islamic and a secular Republic, Khomeini refused propositions of the latter, arguing that "What the nation needs is an Islamic Republic – not a Democratic Republic nor a Democratic Islamic Republic" (Ibid.: 63). Khomeini's ideals prevailed, leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a theocracy based on *velayat-e faqih*, or 'Governance of the (Islamic) Jurist' (Abrahamian, 2008: 143; Mabon, 2013: 96-98). The new Republic was to be constructed upon principles of justice, independence, self-sufficiency, and piety (Sadjadpour: 2010). Elements of Shii thought would thus become enshrined within the fabric of the Iranian state through the government system. Iran diverges from the region by being the sole Persian-majority state, with the largest Shia population in the world, acknowledging Shiism as the official state religion since 1501, being the sole Shia theocracy, and the most influential and vocal Shii state (Mabon, 2013: 93-98; Juneau, 2019: 43). It may be argued that the contradictory legitimacy of the Iranian regime thus stands on two feet: first, a nationalistic narrative of the Persian Empire's glorious past as a source of pride and sense of exceptionalism, which sets modern Iran in a state of 'natural disposition' with clearly defined and solidified national borders. Second, a revolutionary, universal, and Islamic narrative, to which the theocratic regime, based on the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, governs the state through the interpretation and formulation of religious scripture. Consequently, criticism of particular

government policies can efficiently be translated into criticism of Islam, which legitimises the oppression of critical voices (Farhi, 2005: 16-17).

Iran’s history and religion thus plays a fundamental role in the identity of the nation and the legitimacy of the state, and consequently the government’s domestic and foreign policies. In the aftermath of the revolution, Khomeini was quick to identify the enemies of the Islamic world in general, and of the Islamic Republic in particular: on one hand were the ‘Great Satan’ (U.S.) and the ‘Little Satan’ (Israel), responsible for the imperialistic oppression of Muslim nations, particularly the Palestinians (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 8-11). On the other hand were the Al Saud dynasty, who collaborated with the oppressors and were “corrupt and unworthy to be the guardians of Mecca and Medina (...) traitors to the two holy shrines” (Mabon, 2013: 175). The perception of the Al Saud as imperialistic collaborators, combined with the rejection of monarchical regimes as an acceptable form of government within Islam, made Saudi Arabia a natural ideological competitor and a useful ‘punching bag’ to deflect domestic opposition and to unite supporters around a common foe. As argued by Seliktar and Rezaei, the perception of the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia as enemies of Islam and of the Islamic Republic is intertwined: “Since the Saudi Kingdom, the main rival of Khomeinism, was the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Khomeini tried to even the playing field by declaring the Muslim shrines of Jerusalem to be of equal value and essentially appointing Iran as its custodian” (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 1). The ideological nature of the Iranian state thus includes a significant extra-territorial, Pan-Islamic, and revolutionary principle, which “asserted that the mandate of the religious ruler extends beyond Iran to include the entire *Ummah*, the universe of Muslim countries” (Ibid.: 5).

The political structure the Iranian state is extremely complicated, with political power and the decision-making process balanced between elected and unelected government institutions. These institutions are split between two sections consisting of three elected bodies and six appointed or approved bodies, which are centred around the powers of the Supreme Leader and the President (Mabon, 2013: 98; BBC: n/d).

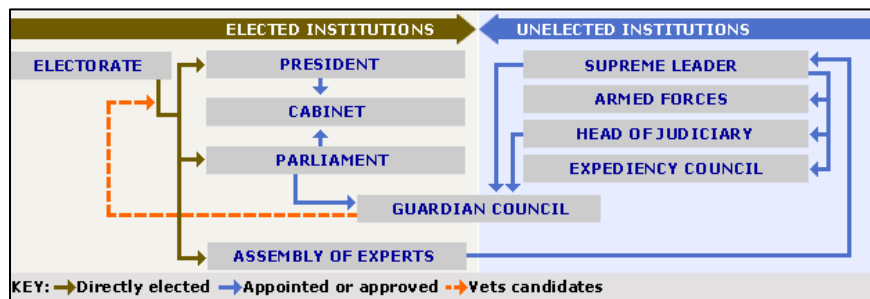


Figure 6: overview of the political structure of Iran (BBC, n.d: Who holds the power?).

The highest-ranking political and religious authority of the state is that of the Supreme Leader, an office established and first held by Khomeini. The Supreme Leader is Iran’s head of state and commander in chief and is responsible for the appointment of several pivotal government institutions. The Head of the Judiciary, the Guardian Council, and the Expediency Council are all

political in nature and heavily influenced by conservative hard-liners. The core responsibility of these institutions is to ensure that Sharia law and the clerical interpretation of religious scripture is adequately maintained in the legislation and policies of the state. The Guardian Council, for example, has the right to veto legislation passed by Parliament, which is considered to be un-Islamic or unconstitutional, and holds the power to approve or reject candidates to parliamentary and presidential elections. The influence of the Guardian Council thus heavily constrains the potential for adopting reformist and more moderate policies (Abrahamian, 2008: 162-169; Mabon, 2013: 99-100). Iran can, based on a Western interpretation of the word, hardly be defined as democratic. Nonetheless, the electorate – men and women above the age of 18 – have some political influence in that they elect the President, Members of Parliament (MP's), and the Assembly of Experts. The President functions as head of government and is the highest elected government position, although the influence of the presidency is limited by that of the Supreme Leader. MP's can introduce and pass legislation, as well as summon and impeach the President or his ministers. The Assembly of Experts, which is the last elected institution, has the sole responsibility of appointing the Supreme Leader, monitor his performance, and, hypothetically, remove him from office if deemed incapable of fulfilling his duties (Abrahamian, 2008: 162-169).

While it may be argued that the intertwinement of these elected and unelected government institutions provide some form of checks and balances, thus ensuring that one does not gain absolute power over the others, the Iranian political system can at the very best be defined as an 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria, 1997; Zakaria, 2002). Particularly the influence of the Supreme Leader, and his power to appoint leaders of the armed forces, the judiciary, and the Guardian Council, make the system inherently illiberal. As the Guardian Council has the power to bar candidates to the elected institutions, reformist with ambitions to fundamentally change Iran's domestic and foreign policy direction are systematically checked (Abrahamian, 2008: 163-67; Purchia, 2009). Regardless, the political establishment of Iran is able to draw some degree of legitimacy through quasi-democratic elections and a relatively high electoral participation (Vakil, 2019).

At its core, Iranian politics is a constant struggle between moderate political reformist on one hand, and conservative revolutionary hard-liners on the other hand. As the decade between 1979 and 1989 was dominated by the revolutionary's consolidation of power and the purge of moderate, secular, and democratic forces, so was the reformist period of 1989-2002 characterised by economic and political liberalisation, pluralism, and improved foreign relations. The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2002 "axis of evil" speech, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq strengthened the conservatives, bolstered anti-Americanism, and threw the moderates on the defensive (Abrahamian, 2008: 169-94). This culminated in the 2005 election of President Ahmadinejad, who "won on the double platform of strengthening national security and fulfilling the populist promises of the Khomeini era" (Ibid.: 193). Tehran's baseline perception of its regional environment is one of encirclement, antagonism, and mistrust (Juneau, 2019: 42). Consequently, the political system of moderates and conservatives continues to be perceptive to external pressures and incentives,



Graphic 7: map of Iranian ethnic groups (US Institute of Peace, 2013).

thus resulting in an entanglement of foreign and security policy issues with domestic politics. The U.S. decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018 exemplifies this, as it fuelled the narrative favoured by conservative hard-liners while throwing the relatively moderate Rouhani administration on the defensive. As argued by Thomas Juneau, “(...) pushing Iran empowers the very hard-liners whom the United States most opposes, while it weakens the moderates who favor reform” (Ibid: 46). Consequently, “the punishment-oriented nature of external pressures” strengthens the hard-liner’s political narrative by “allowing them to identify proponents of reform as weak on security”

(Farhi, 2005: 19). While external pressures matter, identifying these as the sole driving force is an oversimplification. To a certain extent, the post-1979 regimes have taken advantage of their geopolitical isolation to sustain a narrative of an antagonistic international environment, thus strengthening the political establishment’s internal hold on power. Consequently, it can be argued that these political narratives nourish the perception of an actual hostile environment, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As argued by Ervand Abrahamian, Iranians are bound together through national identity derived from “common history, common geography, common language, and common religion, but also by common experience in the recent past (...) History has turned subjects, peasants, and often non-Persian speakers into fully fledged Iranian citizens. This national identity is questioned only in the peripheral Sunni regions inhabited by Kurds, Turkmen, and Baluchis” (Abrahamian, 2008: 195). The demographic composition of Iran is a vital aspect in the legitimacy and security of the regime, which relies on sectarian and nationalistic political narratives. In 2020, the Iranian population amounted to 85 million people, consisting of a tinderbox of ethnicities, including Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, Kurds, Persians, and Turkmen, among others. In terms of religion, official numbers estimate that 99.4% of Iranians are Muslims, with 90-95% adhering to Shiism and the remaining 5-10% to the Sunnism (CIA, 2020b). Non-Muslim religious minorities include Baha’i, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (Mabon, 2013: 91-92). While access to data remains restricted, thus making such evaluations difficult, recent research estimates that fewer Iranians identify as Muslims, and that the separation of politics and religion is increasingly favoured (Maleki & Arab, 2020) Nonetheless, as argued by Rasmus Christian Elling, perceiving increased public secularism as a decrease in the support to the Islamic Republic is an oversimplification, which does not account for the many Iranians supporting the government in particular policies for nationalistic

reasons. Likewise, some Muslims supporting the intertwining of politics and religion may be opposed to the government's stance on particular policies (Rich, 2020).

Because of the regimes reluctance to publicise demographic information, details on ethnic minorities remains somewhat unclear and contested (Mabon: 2013, 155). The largest ethnic group within Iran are Persians, which comprise approximately 50-60% of the Iranian population. Persians are overrepresented in the governing institutions, are typically wealthier than other groups, and have been the primary beneficiaries of governmental economic and social policies, both during the monarchy and the Republic. Persian language, or Farsi, is the *de jure* national language and is spoken in all government institutions. Nationalist rhetoric often draws on an understanding and appreciation of Persian history, literature, poetry, etc (Ibid.: 156-57). As ethnic Persians constitute slightly more than half of the Iranian population, the remaining 40-50% consist, from highest to lowest, of Azeris, Kurds, Baluchi's, Arabs, and Turkmen. Large portions of these ethnic groups live in Iran's peripheral border regions and are transnational in nature, such as Azeris in Azerbaijan, Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, Arabs in Iraq, Baluchi's in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Turkmen in Turkmenistan. This demographic composition of the Iranian population occasionally strains relations between the state and the minority groups, thus also affecting and shaping Iranian foreign policy (Ibid.: 186-95).

Azeris, for example, complicates Iran's relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan, as latent irredentist aspirations pose a potential threat to the territorial integrity of the Iranian state. Iran's support to Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict clearly illustrates an Iranian foreign policy of containment towards Azerbaijani territorial aspirations, regardless of cultural and religious similarities. Most Azeris are Shia Muslims and are often considered as the most integrated group within Iranian society, probably best exemplified through the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is an ethnic Azeri. This, however, clearly does not substantially change Iranian foreign and security policies towards Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Azeri minority (Ibid.: 158-59). A similar concern evolves around the Arab Iranian minority in the western region of Khuzestan, which like the Azeri's are encountering suspicion, particularly in terms of relations to neighbouring Iraq and due to secessionist and irredentist political agendas. The territorial concerns are exacerbated by the fact that the Khuzestan region produces 80% of Iran's crude oil revenue, thus also posing significant economic concerns (Ibid.: 163-65). Territorial concerns also evolve around the Kurdish and Balochi minorities respectively, both transnational in nature, and which complicates relations with neighbouring Iraq and Turkey in terms of the former, and with Pakistan and Afghanistan in terms of the latter. Irredentist ambitions of a 'Greater Baluchistan', encompassing of parts of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, together with similar ambitions of a 'Greater Kurdistan', encompassing of parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, poses serious concerns for the territorial integrity of the Iranian state. The presence of U.S. and NATO-forces in neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq have prompted concerns over possible external involvement within Iran, which in turn have increased discrimination, suspicion and oppression towards the Arab, Baluchi, and Kurdish minorities (Ibid.: 159-63). Tehran is also sensitive to the

perception of Riyadh's ability to manipulate and exacerbate ethnic tensions by providing ideological, financial, and material support to ethnic and religious groups with kinship ties (Ibid: 182-84).

Asides to the ethnic minorities within the boundaries of Iran, significant religious minorities exist as well. These include, as already mentioned, a substantial Sunni Muslim minority, but also Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Baha'i. While all minorities are encouraged to convert to Shiism, the Iranian constitution does recognise Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism as legitimate religions. Although religious minorities may enjoy some degree of political and civic space and legal protection from the state, persecution, harassment, and discrimination by state and non-state actors alike does occur. Religious creeds with proselytizing³ agendas, such as Christian Protestants or Baha'i, are persecuted and discriminated against systematically in comparison to minorities who remain within their religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. In this sense, it may be argued that while religious minorities do not pose a direct territorial threat to the state, their mere presence, combined with the possible proselytization of Shia Muslims, does conflict with the ruling ideology of the state. Consequently, the potential increase of religious minorities through conversion can be perceived as a direct threat to the ruling ideology of the state (Ibid.: 131-40).

The historical context to which the Republic was established, the ruling ideology and political structure of the state, the ethnic and religious composition of the population, combined with the actual and perceived interference of foreign states, are all pivotal to comprehend the formation of the state's threat perceptions, foreign policies, and grand strategy. The establishment of the Islamic Republic initiated a new state-building process, based one hand on an official narrative of Iranian exceptionalism, rooted in history, nationalism, and ethnic chauvinism, and on the other hand a religious narrative of a pious theocratic regime ruling through the interpretation and formulation of religious scripture. The peculiar 'Janus-faced' duality of the state divided between a Persian nation-state with solidified and natural borders, and between a revolutionary Islamic Republic with universal aspirations, have sustained the Iranian regime and political system for more than four decades, while simultaneously creating both internal and external tensions. A theocracy based on Shiism inevitably marginalises other religious minorities. Furthermore, ethnic chauvinism, particularly expressed by the Persian majority, will naturally conflict with other ethnic minority groups. When a group's ethnic and religious identity both conflicts with the official ideology and political narrative of the state, tensions are bound to occur. Occasionally, when demands for autonomy, secession, or improved minority rights are at stake, these tensions may be expressed through violence, particularly when the political and civic space deliberately have been restricted to quell opposition (Ibid.: 175).

In such an environment of domestic insecurity, political narratives of a hostile external environment are convenient. Modern Iranian history provides a wide selection of examples to validate the accuracy of such narratives. As such, the identification of the external enemies of the

³ To try to persuade someone to change their religious or political beliefs to your own.

Muslim world in general, and of the Islamic Republic in particular, can be a useful strategy to deflect attention from domestic problems and grievances, while it simultaneously provides opportunities to exploit ethno-national and sectarian divisions in third countries to advance one's geopolitical position. From this point of view, Iranian support to various state and non-state actors across the region, the hostile rhetoric against the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and the partly self-imposed regional isolation, can all be attributed to an internal need for external enemies that will ensure the continuous support of the people, combined with increased regional influence that will function as a deterrent against foreign pre-emptive attacks, thus ensuring the survival of the regime from internal and external threats alike.

6.2.3. Sub-conclusion

This section has accounted for a selection of key domestic variables which have significant influence on the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This rivalry manifests itself as an ideological competition, based on two mutually incompatible ideologies and state structures. While the ideological rivalry originates from the 1979 Iranian revolution, recent regional developments have arguably exacerbated it, leading to an increasingly hostile rhetoric and increased soft power competition.

Both states have utilised nationalistic and sectarian narratives aimed at increasing national unity and deflecting public attention to formulated perceptions of external threats and objects of national interest. Both states have thus de-politicised oppositional groups, claiming that criticism of particular government policies amounts to denunciation of the state, the nation, and of God. This effectively restricts political space and the legal expression of oppositional groups, which consequently have no alternative but to concede, depart, or resolve to illegitimate actions against the state. Exporting radical societal groups consequently provides a dual benefit: on one hand it removes a domestic threat, while on the other hand it can impose an additional menace to the security calculus of a rival. The Saudi state, for example, has at best ignored and at worse facilitated the exportation of radical Islamic fundamentalist to Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Syria, among others. Interestingly, there seems to be an empirical alignment between increased domestic criticism and opposition, and increased soft power support for Islamist movements abroad (Ibid.: 178-80). Furthermore, providing support for non-state actors with similar ideological or sectarian beliefs can help to deflect attention from domestic grievances, increase influence in third states, and counter potential gains made by a regional rival. This is particularly evident in the case of Iran, which has built a web of influence across the region through non-state actors aligned – to varying degrees – with the ideological or sectarian nature of the Islamic Republic. Fundamentally, it enables the regime to put concrete action behind its criticism of the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia, without actually engaging in a direct military confrontation. The regime is thus able to approach and distance itself to these actors according to the internal and external pressures and incentives (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 235-39).

In responding to the internal security dilemmas stemming from ethno-national minorities, religious minorities, and from religious fundamentalist, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have sought to diverge domestic attention to external issues and to export radical groups to third country conflicts. While it may be argued that this strategy has proved somewhat successful in the short-run, it is likely to decrease security over the long-run. By exporting and supporting sectarian and fundamentalist groups across the region, both states are interfering in the internal affairs of third states, exacerbating the sectarian nature of these conflicts, while simultaneously legitimising the extraterritorial use of non-state actors. It comes to no surprise, then, that both Saudi Arabia and Iran perceives foreign interference and the exploitation of ethno-national and religious incongruence as significant threats to the domestic stability of the regime and the territorial integrity of the state. Arguably, with the use of soft power as foreign policy tool, Saudi Arabia and Iran are becoming increasingly entangled in an ideological competition, resulting in an internal-external security dilemma wherein measures that increases the internal security of former through the use of external actions, decreases the internal security of the latter, and vice versa. In conclusion, it can be argued that while geopolitical competition refers to external threats against the state, ideological competition is associated to the internal threats, which can be manipulated and exacerbated by external actors.

As illustrated above, the inclusion of domestic variables advances the comprehension of the complex great power competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This facilitates the illumination of blind spots ignored by a structural analysis. In particular, it assists the comprehension of individual states threat perceptions, which cannot solely be based upon geopolitical and hard power considerations. From this point of view, Israel and Iran, for example, do not perceive one another as existential threats based on geopolitical concerns, but due to the fact that the fabric of the Islamic Republic, as envisioned by Khomeini, emphasises Israel as an enemy of the Islamic world in general and of the Islamic Republic in particular. Once the state attaches itself to an uncompromising and revolutionary ideology, it becomes challenging to disentangle again. Likewise, while geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran originated prior to 1979, the ideological rivalry emerged from post-revolutionary Iran and the subsequent regional struggle between republicanism versus monarchism and Shiism versus Sunnism. The ideological level of competition has thus drastically exacerbated the overall rivalry, adding to the complexity and exigency of the conflict. By opening the 'black box' of the state, it becomes apparent that in a Middle Eastern context, the Western conception of the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states is erroneous. The presence of trans-state identities results in the emergence of a duality between *raison d'état* and *raison de la nation* (Mabon, 2013: 19). It is thus inaccurate to perceive the state as a unitary rational actor, where the interest of the regime is tantamount to the interest of the nation(s).

7. Discussion and Conclusion – Realism in the 21st Century

The unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union, the consequential rise of a unipolar system, and the absence of interstate conflicts left realist scholars in an existential crisis. Neorealism's core tenets and assumptions of state behaviour, particularly in terms of the balance of power theory, were suddenly empirically contradicted. Furthermore, without the constant great power confrontations of the bipolar structure, smaller and medium-sized states were empowered to pursue individual foreign policy goals, making international politics increasingly unpredictable. This imposed great challenges to neorealism, which emphasises the predictability of international politics. Realist scholars found themselves scrambling to explain these deviances from the theory and to counter criticism from other paradigms, particularly of social constructivism. This initiated a debate between rationalists and positivists, which consequently questioned the basic underlying assumptions, definitions, and, essentially, the entire approach to the study of international politics. The realist school fragmented in multiple nuanced and specialised schools of thought, each deviating, to varying degrees, from the core assumptions and principles of the realist tradition (Wivel, 2002: 431-33). Overall, it can be argued that realists were divided into two main blocks, namely those who believed that this paradigm shift developed the realist tradition (Rose, 1998), against those who argued that it degenerated it (Vasquez, 1997). This paper is a contribution to the arguments of the former, insisting that realist scholars must revitalise the school of thought(s) to maintain relevance in academia and among policy makers. Concretely, this contribution is made by testing the neoclassical realist (NcR) approach to the case study of geopolitical and ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

A rationalist and structural explanation of the power competition in the Middle East can go a long way, although it does not perform perfectly. The neorealist approach, applied to a Middle Eastern context, does not face any major obstacles in explaining the multipolar regional (dis)order, the unequal distribution of power and capabilities, the competition for power and security, the formation of cross-sectarian or cross-ideological alliances, and so forth. As such, competition between the regional great powers is not the result of an exceptionally vicious cluster of states, but rather an anarchic international system with no global or regional hegemon to enforce hierarchy (6.1). However, as previously argued (6.1.3), neorealism faces severe problems in terms of the conflict entanglements, particularly “why the two strongest of the four most powerful actors – the USA and Israel – ally with one of the two weaker ones – Saudi Arabia – against another of the two weaker ones: Iran” (Beck, 2020: 88). This contradicts the logic of power balancing, which dictates that “states form alliances in order to prevent stronger powers from dominating them” (Walt, 2013: 18). From a purely structural perspective, thus focusing exclusively on relative power capabilities, Iran is not in a position of dominance – a circumstance which is unlikely to change in a foreseeable future (6.1.2). Consequently, it can be argued that “although power is an important part of the equitation, it is not the only one. It is more accurate to say that states tend to ally with or against the foreign power that poses the greatest threat” (Walt, 2013: 21). As such, states emphasise threats

over power, but neorealism and other rationalist schools of thought have little to offer in the analysis of subjective threat perceptions, leaving this pivotal explanatory variable outside the scope of the theory (Donnelly, 2013: 44).

A mobilised army on a rival state's border, or a nuclear missile directed at one's capital, can reasonably be perceived as an objective security threat. Whether soft power capabilities, such as Pan-Islamic and revolutionary narratives, or an external actor's agitation of a marginalised minority group, objectively can be perceived as threats to 'national security', is arguably more questionable. This initiates a discussion of the very recognition and definition of 'power', 'threats', 'security', 'nation', 'national security', 'interest', 'national interest', as well as the underlying epistemological assumptions of realism in general and of neorealism in particular. By drawing *inspiration* from social constructivist approaches, such as the Copenhagen School of security, thus broadening the concept and definition of security, NcR performs relatively well in explaining the bellicosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Beck, 2020: 89). There can be no doubt that rhetoric, narratives, and the manipulation and agitation of identities and non-state actors are important in this context, as both states perceive these as threats to the internal stability of the regimes (6.2). Consequently, it can be argued that Saudi Arabia and Iran are not predestined to be opponents, but that the nature and origin of the rivalry needs to be identified through a combination of systemic-level and state-level explanatory variables, an approach Waltz repeatedly rejected as reductionistic (Waltz, 1979: 18-19).

Assuming that states are unitary actors corresponds to claim that there is congruence between the state and the nation, and between the interests of the former with the interests of the latter. In many heterogeneous states of the Middle East, where conflictual national and religious identities are abound, and where many states are authoritarian in nature, it is reasonable to discuss whether it would be more appropriate to talk about 'regime interest', rather than 'national interest'. Alternatively, if one insists on the 'national interest' discourse, it is then reasonable to ask: what specific nation is in question (Buzan, 1991: 66-71)? As argued by Alexander Wendt, neorealism and "(...) rational choice directs us to ask some questions and not others, treating the identities and interests of agents as exogenously given and focusing on how the behaviour of agents generates outcomes" (Wendt, 1992: 391-92).

NcR amends rather than modifies the theoretical framework of neorealism, while simultaneously revitalises some central insights of classical realism. It acknowledges the criticism of neorealism from other paradigms, such as liberalism and social constructivism, and, arguably, responds in a satisfactory manner. It does so by self-consciously combining system-level and state-level variables, which enables the analyst of including additional vital elements, such as threat perceptions and international relations of amity or enmity. It can be argued that the cost is greater complexity and less generality, thus trading parsimony for accuracy. This, however, enables the inclusion of ideas, such as identities, ideologies, and interests, which holds a central position in international politics of the Middle East. NcR takes account for the criticism presented by social

constructivists, thus bending the framework of realism, although without breaking it. Or, to use the words of Gideon Rose: “(...) neoclassical realists occupy a middle ground between pure structural theorists and constructivists” (Rose, 1998: 152). What differentiates the two is not a disagreement on the relevance of identities, but whether identities are prior to interests, and whether there can be an objective reality of relative power and systemic constraints. Social constructivists deny the objective existence of the latter, arguing instead that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992; Rose, 1998: 152). In other words, while realists perceive anarchy as the underlying and inevitable condition of international politics, constructivists argue that it is the predetermined rejection of fundamental change which establishes anarchy (Wivel, 2002: 433). In conclusion, while NcR draws inspiration from the criticism of social constructivists, it refuses the core epistemological considerations of power politics and anarchy as social constructs.

Realism, like all theories, must be abstract, used to simplify, and thereby exaggerate. Waltz captures the value of neorealism by stating that it identifies “a small number of big and important things” (Waltz, 1979: 70). While this approach has its merits, it becomes problematic when simplistic theoretical models are presented as categorical empirical claims. NcR can supplement the neorealist tradition by providing more detailed explanations of a given problem. Thus, while a specific realist approach may not be the universally superior approach to all cases, it can, when applied appropriately, provide powerful explanatory value. It is in this regard the researcher’s task to determine where a particular realist theoretical framework is applicable and relevant. When deciding how regularly, in which circumstances, and for which purpose realism should be applied, Jack Donnelly correctly argues “a lot less often than most realist claim, but a lot more frequently than many critics would like to allow” (Donnelly, 2013: 55). Realism in general and NcR in particular, should not be considered as a worldview or moral theory, on the contrary, it should be perceived as, and used for, what it is – an analytical and explanatory theoretical framework. Most students of International Relations have arguably stumbled upon the infamous question: “are you a realist?”, but identifying oneself as a realist – like one would identify in terms of religion or political ideology – makes little sense in terms of IR theories. Because realism is most applicable where the long-term survival of the state is at stake, or when vital short-term national interests are at risk, it is more operational in some cases than others. The further away from these elements the analysis moves, the more realism loses its comparative advantage to other theories. In this sense, realism is arguably more useful in the Middle East or East Asia than in Western Europe or North America, for example. Thus, depending on the researchers thematic and geographical area of interest, realism may be used regularly, occasionally, or never in the analysis of international politics and of foreign policies.

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