

A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2003 Iraq war, the Middle East and North Africa has entered into a New Regional Cold War, characterised by two competing logics: on the one hand, the politicisation of sectarianism opposing a Saudi-led Sunni bloc against an Iran-led Shia bloc and, on the other, an intra-Sunni cleavage around the mobilisation of political Islam, embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters vs its opponents. Blending Buzan and Weaver’s regional security complex theory with Donnelly’s notion of ‘heterarchy’ and applying it to the cold wars the region has experienced, the similarities and differences between the Arab Cold War of the 1950s/60s and the New Regional Cold War reveal the increasing number of heterarchic features within the regional security complex: multiple and heterogeneous power centres, different power rankings, a more visible and relevant role of non-state and transnational actors, and the fragmentation of regional norms.

KEYWORDS

Middle East and North Africa; regional security complex theory; heterarchy, New Regional Cold War

Over the last few decades, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has witnessed external military interventions, state fracturing, domestic democratic upheavals, visible state-society cleavages, the rise of coercive sub-national and transnational actors, the consolidation of two opposing geopolitical blocs, proxy wars, and an increasing number of regional and international powers meddling in various local conflicts.

The increasing salience of the regional geopolitical rivalry between a Saudi-dominated Sunni camp and an opposing Iran-led one should have led to the strengthening of intra-camp cohesion and solidarity, subsuming all other minor dissonances. In particular, according to different theoretical approaches – be they balance of power, balance of threat or securitisation theory – facing what has been increasingly considered by Gulf monarchies an existential threat to their survival in their current shape, the intra-Sunni alignment should have displayed a higher degree of internal consistency, a ‘rally round the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) flag’ effect and, more significantly, a move toward regionalism under the guise of a more unified GCC. Not only has this trend not materialized, with the post-2011 GCC evolution showing ebbs and flows both institutionally and on the policy level – as attested to by the 2017 boycott of Qatar by fellow GCC countries – but the underbalancing

of the Islamic Republic of Iran has continued unabated. Both these elements call for further scrutiny at the theoretical and the empirical level of analysis.

This article will first illustrate how the multifaceted instances of regionalisation in the MENA region have failed to translate into regionalism. It will then review and suggest adjustments to the regional security complex (RSC) theory worked out by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, before applying it to geopolitical trajectories in the MENA region. The MENA RSC is composed by three subcomplexes, North Africa, the Levant and the Gulf. Within each of these, security interdependence is especially intense as their genealogy is linked to a specific conflict which acted as a baptism by fire. While the Levant subcomplex, framed around the Arab-Israeli conflict, has been deemed the determining subcomplex within the region, this article argues that the Gulf subcomplex (which formed after Britain's withdrawal from the area and includes, beyond Gulf Arab states, Iraq and Iran), has increasingly become the dominant one in shaping regional security dynamics, and is more and more interlinked with the Levant subcomplex.

RSC theory will be refined thanks to the conceptual framework of heterarchy, recently introduced into International Relations theory by Jack Donnelly. Heterarchies are systems with multiple, heterogeneous centres, or more precisely "systems of multiple functionally differentiated non-territorial centers arranged in divided or tangled hierarchies".¹ While Donnelly has employed the concept of heterarchy mostly with reference to domestic political orders or the evolution of the international system, it will be shown how this notion can refine RSC theory by introducing an additional ordering principle beyond anarchy and hierarchy, and allowing for the conceptualisation of a regional order characterised by the diffusion of a friend-enemy logic among both state and non-state actors.

In the third part, an historical overview coupled with a revised, heterarchy-based RSC approach will be applied to the analysis of the current New Regional Cold War (NRCW). The article will compare the region's recent geopolitical alignments and re-alignments with that of the Arab Cold War of the 1950s/60s, through the prism of regionalisation and the limited regionalism in evidence across different historical phases.

The article will end by empirically demonstrating how the notion of heterarchy can be heuristically applied to the study of regional geopolitics. The examples provided attest to the increasingly heterarchical nature of the regional order, in which the coexistence of different hierarchies and multiple rankings among state and non-state actors has become a defining feature of the regional insecurity architecture.

The MENA region: a tale of regionalisation without regionalism

Few other world regions display the same degree of regionalisation as the Middle East and North Africa and yet few, if any, have so little regionalism. While regionalisation is a spontaneous, bottom-up, endogenous process involving a variety of non-state actors organised in formal and informal networks, centred around strong cultural, political and social dimensions, regionalism is a state-led process of integration, whereby formal regional institutions and organisations, mostly in the economic and security realms, are established and sustained.²

¹Donnelly, "Heterarchic Structure of International Governance".

²Börzel and Risse, *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*.

Understood in a broad sense, examples of regionalisation abound, thanks to the existence of strong collectively shared features in the region at the social, religious, cultural and linguistic levels. Instances of regionalisation include the 1950s and '60s secular revolutionary pan-Arab ideals, the reverberation of political Islam in the 1980s and, starting from the 2011 Arab uprisings, the diffusion of new revolutionary democratic norms. Accordingly, the region has no shortage of social and ideational referents, which travel quite easily beyond national boundaries, becoming sources of allegiance and normative frameworks for intra-regional social and political mobilisation.

Yet, rather than leading towards forms of regionalism, normative and policy fragmentation of the regional order has taken several shapes and has been re-articulated around changing threat perceptions regarding who/what poses the most immediate danger to the security and stability of conservative Gulf monarchies. Ideational referents have become hostage to framing processes whereby even regimes belonging to the same geopolitical camp are constructed as enemies and henceforth treated as such, as exemplified by the Saudi-initiated crisis with Qatar which erupted in March 2014 and again, even more spectacularly, in June 2017.

Regionalism is a state-led process of integration in various policy arenas, traditionally progressing from lower to higher politics thanks to spillover effects, and embodied in the creation of regional organisations. In the Middle East and North Africa, regionalism can count on a number of formal organisations, ranging from the Arab League, which dates back to the end of World War Two, to the Arab Maghreb Union and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which have hardly evolved in terms of integration, to the Gulf Cooperation Council, more recent and yet increasingly relevant.

Most of these organisations subsist in an under-institutionalised form and with limited autonomy *vis-à-vis* their creators, showing scarce development of supranational, rather than intergovernmental traits. The only organisation which has shown some dynamism in terms of evolution and attempts at promoting further integration has been the GCC.

The genealogy of the GCC, created in 1981, can be traced back to at least three events: the 1979 overthrow of the Shah in Iran by way of a cross-ideological coalition, rapidly high-jacked by an Islamist revolutionary and expansionist ideology; the subsequent outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq – two revolutionary regimes with hegemonic ambitions which then locked into a decade-long war;³ and, lastly, the increased sense of importance and foreign policy autonomy by Gulf countries due, among other things, to the oil bonanza. Thus, the emergence of the GCC came in part as a response to a heightened threat perception from post-revolutionary Iran, but also as an attempt to establish an alternative to the Arab League for Gulf policymaking, at a time when, thanks to their increased financial capacities, Gulf countries feared becoming the financiers of the region's post-turmoil stabilization efforts – without necessarily being acknowledged as full-fledged political players.⁴

Rather than institutionally embodying specific social, cultural or religious norms, Gulf regionalism has mostly been driven by perceptions of insecurity, with institutional integration within the Arab Gulf considered better protection than that offered by the main existing Arab regional organisation, the Arab League. Yet, while being the only sub-regional organisation with prospects for security and defence integration, progress beyond declaratory policy has remained limited (even though it has included strengthened security

³Ulrichsen, "Implications of the Qatar crisis".

⁴Carvalho Pinto, "From 'Follower' to 'Role model'".

cooperation) for both exogenous and endogenous reasons. On the one hand, the GCC has struggled to become the Gulf's main venue for defence policymaking as the US security umbrella has been extended to Gulf countries on a bilateral basis rather than under the aegis of regionalism. On the other hand, some small Gulf countries, most vocally Oman, have resisted the increasingly frequent integration attempts spearheaded by Saudi Arabia since the 2011 Arab uprisings. These include King Abdullah's vision for a closer 'Gulf Union' put forward at the December 2011 GCC summit in Riyadh, or then Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal's June 2012 proposal for an integrated military and regional security policy, which has since then been tabled at every annual GCC summit.⁵

Despite the richness of regionally shared cultural, social and religious referents and the plethora of regional organisations and debate surrounding their status and evolution, the region has been depicted as a "region without regionalism",⁶ and the interplay between these two dimensions remains ambiguous at best.⁷ Namely, while one would expect regionalisation to be positively correlated with processes of regionalism, in the MENA region the opposite seems to have occurred. Morten Valbjørn argues that the high interpenetration on the social, cultural and religious levels seems to have slowed down processes of institutional integration.⁸

This article goes along with this insight and suggests that times of increased regionalisation can actually correspond to a slowing down of institutional integration. In other words, if heightened regionalisation – to be understood as a higher occurrence of intra-regional interpenetration and higher permeability by regional states to transnational regional referents – is perceived as an ideational threat to regime security, prospects for regionalism will wane. However, it also posits that, while clearly defined threat perceptions by leading regional states can increase prospects for regionalism, when the identification of enemies spans different ideological camps – a form of ideological multipolarity in the words of Mark Haas⁹ or normative fragmentation as Barnett would put it,¹⁰ – this hampers regionalism.

Even more surprisingly, at a time of a New Regional Cold War, regional organisations, which have supposedly been created to solve collective problems, show a continuing low degree of institutionalisation and efficacy. Their under-performance occurs despite perceptions of increased security threats, both a cause and a consequence of processes of regional securitisation and militarisation. The New Regional Cold War has so far failed to catalyse the regional institutional developments that would lead to further political, economic and security integration, and if anything, has fragmented the existing key regional security organisation, the GCC, while militarising its outreach and activities.

Towards a heterarchic regional security complex theory

The regional system has traditionally been considered deeply penetrated or interdependent.¹¹ While this sounds axiomatic to scholars of the region, visualising the region as an

⁵Ulrichsen, "Implications of the Qatar crisis".

⁶Aarts, "The Middle East".

⁷Valbjørn, "North Africa and the Middle East".

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Haas, "Ideological polarity and balancing".

¹⁰Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab politics*, 49-52.

¹¹For a critical literature review and still very analytically powerful considerations on the systemic level of analysis of Middle East international relations, see Gause, "Systemic approaches to Middle East".

interpenetrated one means rejecting the neorealist model of states with governments able to insulate their domestic systems from external influences – like billiard balls that only come into contact at their hard outer shell – and adopting the view that sees “a set of interconnected organisms separated only by porous membranes”.¹² Notwithstanding the reasons for the penetrated nature of the regional system, be it the existence of generative conflicts,¹³ cultural and identity markers, or the socially constructed nature of the region by external players,¹⁴ few would debate that despite these inter-linkages, the region fares poorly in terms of regionalism. As was argued previously, regionalisation and regionalism hardly go hand in hand, especially in the MENA region, where the permeability of states is not a constant: at times of retrenchment of sub- and trans-national norms calling for large-scale allegiances, like pan-Arabism, Islamism, or revolutionary ideals, as was the case in the 1970s, national dynamics displayed a higher degree of insulation from cross-border appeals and ideational threats.

Carl Brown, who famously defined the Middle East as “a penetrated system, one subject to an exceptional level of external intervention and yet, by virtue of its cultural distinctiveness, stubbornly resistant to subordination”,¹⁵ distinguished between extra-regional and domestic/regional penetration. In his view, the international relations of the Middle East were characterised by frequent shifts in alliances, heavy penetration of the system by outside powers, a zero-sum logic and an overall trend towards “homeostasis”, featuring the inability of any regional player to substantially modify the existing balance of power.¹⁶

Whether extra-regional actors can belong to a regional order or not distinguishes different regional security approaches: for example, in David Lake and Patrick Morgan’s regional orders,¹⁷ membership can be overlapping as regional systems are and remain open, while in Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver’s regional security complex (RSC) theory, regional complexes are mutually exclusive and even great powers can only belong to one RSC.¹⁸

Regional security complex theory was first elaborated by Buzan and Weaver in 1983 and then substantially modified in 1998 and 2003. It is in this latest, much less state-centric version, that RSC will be taken as the point of departure of an analysis of the New Regional Cold War. Regional security complexes are “sets of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization or both are so inter-linked that their security problems cannot be reasonably analyzed or resolved apart from one another”.¹⁹ They are defined by durable (but not permanent) patterns of amity and enmity, taking the form of sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence. In other words, perceptions of security and insecurity lie at the heart of regional configurations of order, as perceptions structure socially constructed relations among regional actors.

The key elements at the basis of any RSC are three sets of dichotomies, in addition to power distribution among actors: anarchy versus integration (polarity), amity versus enmity (relations among units), and securitization versus de-securitization (processes of threat

¹²Korany and Dessouki, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, 84.

¹³Buzan and Weaver, *Regions and Powers*.

¹⁴Halliday, *Middle East in International Relations*; Bilgin, *Regional Security in Middle East*.

¹⁵Brown, *International politics and Middle East*, 3-5. On the Arab world’s permeability, see also Noble, “From Arab to Middle Eastern system”, and for an alternative view, see Salloukh and Brynen, *Persistent Permeability*.

¹⁶Brown, *International politics and Middle East*, 6-8.

¹⁷Lake and Morgan, *Regional Orders*.

¹⁸Buzan and Weaver, *Regions and Powers*, 48-9.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 43-5.

construction).²⁰ The first element, however, needs to be qualified. While the region has tended to be considered a test case for realists, given its high level of war-proneness, volatility of alliances, emphasis on hard security, and absence of strong regional institutions,²¹ the lack of progress towards integration and the limited extent of regionalism does not necessarily imply that the ordering principle of the regional order is anarchy. Namely, the lack of a clear hierarchy and the shifting ranking and power perceptions among regional players qualify the regional order for being conceptualised as neither anarchic nor hierarchal, but rather an example of heterarchical order.

The notion of heterarchy was originally used by archaeologists, referring to “a system composed of differentiated but unranked segments, where no clear hierarchical ordering of social segments can be detected”.²² When applied to contemporary forms of political authority, as argued by Birgit Embalò, “[t]he heterarchy concept is opposed to the ideal of the hierarchical representation of the state as standing above and disciplining other power groups within the society”.²³ Heterarchical orders refer to systems with multiple and often ‘tangled’ hierarchies.²⁴ Heterarchy can become a label under which, precisely because the regional actors’ inter-connectedness is so high, both domestic and regional power dynamics can be subsumed. Different configurations of political order exist, according to how ranking operates. Ranking is a manifestation of vertical differentiation, and is a function of two attributes: political authority and material coercive capabilities. Orders can be without ranking (anarchy or autarchy), or they can have a single ranking (hierarchy), or multiple rankings (heterarchy). In unranked orders, anarchy is characterised by fragmentation of political authority and an unclear distribution of coercive material capabilities, while autarchy occurs when actors have equal authority and control over material coercive resources. Hierarchies can take at least two shapes: if they are based on legitimate authority, they are command hierarchies, while if they are based on coercive capabilities they are control hierarchies. Lastly, heterarchies, a distinctive type of vertical differentiation, imply a differential rule and can be soft or hard (or occupy a position on a continuum between the two).²⁵ In international terms, heterarchies imply a simultaneous concentration and dispersion of power.

Looking at the MENA regional security complex through the prism of heterarchy makes it possible to challenge assumptions traditionally held by neorealists and to some extent shared by RSC: the dichotomy between anarchy and hierarchy as the only two structural ordering principles; the excessive state-centric emphasis, and clear demarcation between the domestic and regional or international level. This is because heterarchy introduces a third ordering principle beyond hierarchy and anarchy, it emphasizes the role of sub-national, transnational and international actors – even in processes of fragmentation of the existing political order – and accepts more blurred lines between the reciprocal influences of the domestic and regional levels, overcoming the usual second-third image IR debate.²⁶ Once the first element, polarity, has been re-conceptualised, the other two key elements of RSC,

²⁰*Ibid.*, 88.

²¹Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Brown, *International Politics and Middle East*; David, “Explaining Third World Alignment”; Ryan, *Inter-Arab alliances*.

²²Blanton and Fargher, *Collective action in the formation*, 89-90.

²³Embalò, “Civil-military relations and political order”, 255.

²⁴Donnelly, “Rethinking political structures”.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed”.

amity-enmity and securitization-desecuritization, complement the approach, and allow for a comprehensive reading of the region's conflictual dynamics.

Regional Cold Wars from the 1950s to 2017

The Arab Cold War and the insufficiency of ideological cleavages

In the 1950s and 1960s, as famously recalled by Malcom Kerr, the region witnessed an Arab Cold War which, although it took place during the wider Cold War and in a geopolitically crucial region for both superpowers, was mostly dictated by Arab agency. The dynamics of this regional Cold War were driven by Arab capitals, especially Cairo, Baghdad and Riyadh.²⁷ Inter-Arab relations were dominated by a deep ideological cleavage, broadly opposing socialist revolutionary republics against Western-leaning conservative monarchies. As acknowledged by RSC theory, the mere distribution of power among the competing camps would be insufficient to account for the emerging pattern of conflict, were it not for ideational elements and threat perceptions. The key ideational element, Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab rhetoric – broadcast via his Voice of the Arabs (*Sawt al-Arab*), an Egyptian transnational radio program listened to across the Arab world in the 1950s and '60s – stirred feelings of a *raison de la nation arabe*.²⁸ This was perceived as an existential threat by conservative monarchies, which fought back by appealing and strengthening references to a *raison d'état*. This substantially trumped any ambition of fulfilling pan-Arab designs or letting a popular instance of regionalisation lead to regionalism and regional integration. State-driven geopolitical competition between the two blocs created a transnational political activism premised on specific understandings of Arabism and Islamism: while Egypt was promoting a particular brand of a socialist revolutionary model, Saudi Arabia countered the perceived ideational threat by standing for and actively supporting a monarchical model legitimised by the religious establishment.

The epitomization of Egypt's attempt at re-ordering the regional system was its unification with Syria in the United Arab Republic (UAR) between 1958 and 1961. While the ideological cleavage was the master framework determining the divisions between the two camps, the socialist bloc, broadly allied with Moscow and oriented against the pro-Western monarchies in the region, was far from monolithic. In other words, despite the existence of two geopolitical camps fighting for survival and influence across the region, the ideological cleavage was not sufficient to prioritise alliances consistently and maintain them. Heterarchic elements emerged and led to rapidly changing rankings in alliance choices linked to changing threat perceptions to regime security. If socialist pan-Arabism had oriented foreign policy choices and the creation of a common revolutionary front, the norm of sovereignty had not dissolved altogether, as attested to by post-1958 Iraq. Namely, splits occurred in the wake of Iraq's nationalist revolution in 1958, led by Abd al-Karim Qasim who, despite ideological proximity to Nasser's pan-Arab views, refused to accept Egyptian tutelage.²⁹ As demonstrated also by the early break-up of the UAR, Nasser's lack of a collegial attitude – even among like-minded regimes – led to shifting alignments, with Syria and Iraq opting to balance against Egyptian hegemonic designs. The revolutionary bloc fragmented over

²⁷Kerr, *The Arab cold war, 1958-1967*.

²⁸Valbjørn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War".

²⁹Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 40.

the definition of the strongest pan-Arab credentials,³⁰ with Nasser attacking both Syria and Iraq and, from the mid-1960s onward, softening tones against Saudi Arabia, hollowing out the previous clear-cut ideological bipolarity.

After an initial phase in which ideological proximity was deemed the key attribute in forging an alliance, the Egyptian bid for regional ideational hegemony fell prey to the personal power politics of Nasser, whose standing and pan-Arab legitimacy suffered a deadly blow with the 1967 defeat. The defeat significantly weakened Egypt's pan-regional ideological legitimacy claims and signalled the emergence of multiple power centres in the region. The short-lived bipolar phase in regional geopolitics paved the way for the consolidation of stronger heterarchic features within the regional security complex. Strong elements of regionalisation, such as socialist pan-Arabism, had only epiphenomenally led to greater instances of regionalism, as exemplified by the short-lived UAR, further evidence of the region's difficult path towards forms of political integration.

It could not have been a Cold War without a proxy war: regional rivalries played out in the 1962-70 Yemen war which, starting from a fight between revolutionary and monarchical forces, eventually drew in both regional (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan) and international players (the Soviet Union, but also the US and UK). There, Soviet and Egyptian support for the republican side in the 1962 revolution had a military component, with Egyptian troops arriving in the country on 26 September 1962 alongside the republican revolutionaries, while Yemeni royalists took refuge in the north, asking for support from Saudi Arabia. When the British withdrew from Yemen in 1967, a Marxist regime came to power in South Yemen, further destabilizing the neighbourhood, especially fomenting an insurgency in Oman in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³¹

All the key features traditionally identifying a Cold War were therefore present in the region's Arab Cold War through the 1950s and '60s: rivalry between regional state and non-state actors, lack of direct military conflict, a domestically intended impact of the struggle, relevance of soft power beyond military and financial strength, as well as access to local clients.³²

The 1970s represented an age of inter-Arab cooperation, characterised by the ideological convergence among Arab states – and, crucially, the alignment between Egypt and Saudi Arabia – over the identification of Israel as the main regional enemy. Even though Egypt's relative material and ideational power was severely diminished in light of the military confrontations with Israel, this was not sufficient to determine a shift in regional polarity, while an intensely felt perception of Israel as the main threat to regional security and to Arab countries' ability to stand up for Palestine was. The factors allowing for the consolidation of an Arab front within an heterarchic regional security complex were the de-securitization of the ideational and material threat perception represented by Nasser's Egypt, the change in power rankings with Israel's rise and, with the 1971 British withdrawal from the Gulf, the slowly increasing assertiveness of the Arab Gulf. In particular, this intensified when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed bilateral peace accords with Israel in March 1979. Egypt's

³⁰Pan-arabism here is understood, as in Valbjørn and Bank, as a specific form of Arab nationalism centred around the idea that the Arab world is a pan-system whose ultimate goal is reaching territorial unity. It is different from political Arabism, which considers the Arab world an anarchic international society with distinct Arab norms, among which intra-Arab solidarity. See Valbjørn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War", 9-10.

³¹Katz, "The Gulf and Great Powers".

³²Valbjørn, unpublished conference presentation, Nottingham, May 2017.

'betrayal' of the Palestinian cause and pan-Arab norms led to its expulsion from the Arab League and its ostracisation from regional politics for a decade. As a consequence, within such a heterarchic regional security complex, the agency of the Gulf subcomplex became more visible and relevant, and a new norm gained currency: the 'conservative as stability' mantra against post-revolutionary Iran's regional outreach.

In fact, the second era of inter-Arab cooperation was triggered by the post-1979 Iranian threat to the Arab character of the regional order and the ensuing necessity to create and solidify an anti-revisionist and anti-revolutionary camp. The Iranian revolution acted as a catalyst in subsuming all fears and threat perceptions across the Arab world under a single banner. Realignment of great powers also occurred, with the US improving relations with pro-Soviet Iraq, while the Soviets mended ties with pro-American Oman, UAE and Qatar.³³ In 1990, however, with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, even this second epiphenomenal attempt at Arab unity *vis-à-vis* a non-Arab threat was brought to an end.³⁴

A New Regional Cold War

The New Regional Cold War gradually evolved in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war, a conflict created by an extra-regional power which was intended to lead to regime change, and which, by doing so, further fragmented the existing regional order. First, it caused a split in the Arab League: Gulf powers tacitly agreed with US military deployments, while Syria publicly criticised the attack, thereby fracturing hard-won Arab unity. The fragmentation of the regional order worsened in the post-conflict phase: the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the refashioning of the political system profoundly destabilized the country and the regional balance of threat.³⁵ The US' top-down creation of a multi-sectarian power-sharing system rapidly empowered Shia Islamist forces, long oppressed by Saddam Hussein. This altered the domestic balance of power, opening up power vacuums that regional state and non-state actors progressively filled.³⁶ From 2004 onwards, Iraq descended first into insurgency, then a full-blown civil war, in which religious and political groups – Al Qaeda, the Badr Brigade, the Sadrist movement, later Mahdi's army and ISIS – increasingly filled the gaps in power and legitimacy left by Iraqi state, justifying their actions in sectarian terms.³⁷

The New Regional Cold War reached an apex in 2006 with the sectarian turn of the civil war in Iraq and the Hezbollah-Israeli war in the summer of that year. The two events attest to the double nature of the NRCW: on the one hand, the stronger regime-society dimension as exemplified by the victory over Israel of a non-state actor belonging to the 'radical bloc', as is Hezbollah, powerfully vindicating the norm of political Arabism in a trans-sectarian way,³⁸ on the other, the sectarianization of the Iraq civil war epitomised by Iranian and Saudi attempts to balance each other off in an increasingly heterarchic Iraqi context.

³³Katz, "The Gulf and Great Powers".

³⁴Springborg, "Arab unity, a fickle beast".

³⁵Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

³⁶Gause, *International Relations of Persian Gulf*. Dodge, *From war to new authoritarianism*.

³⁷Dodge and Wasser, *The Crisis of the Iraqi State*.

³⁸Valbjørn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War".

Politicisation of sectarianism and the rise of non-state actors

Hezbollah's symbolic victory over Israel projected the Iranian-created Lebanese Shia force beyond its sectarian dimension, transforming its Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, into a pan-Arab leader across the Arab world for a short period of time. A Shia non-state actor came to be seen as key in the resistance axis, and the last defender of the Palestinian cause. This amplified the cleavage between Arab regimes and their societies, further discrediting these regimes' normative claims of pan-Arab solidarity. For this reason, in addition to the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri – a close ally of Saudi Arabia – the fight against Hezbollah became a priority for Gulf leaders. The eroding pan-Arab and nationalist legitimacy of most Arab regimes was however not only linked to the widespread perception across the Arab world of Hezbollah as the last bastion of defence against Israel, but it was also seen as a function of many Arab regimes' post-populist nature, which manifested itself with a decreasing capability to keep their socio-economic end of the bargain with their societies.³⁹

At the same time, the deterioration of the domestic situation in Iraq following the 2003 US invasion was increasingly affected by the diffusion of sectarian norms, with the progressive transformation from banal sectarianism to politicized and securitized sectarianism, instrumentally fostered by the national and regional elites and incrementally salient at the societal level as well.⁴⁰ It also epitomised a notable feature of this period, namely the role of national and transnational non-state actors, mostly militias, with the concomitant process of 'militiafication', of both Shia security forces and Sunni militant groups. Arab states were becoming less and less like billiard balls, increasingly struggling to insulate their domestic equilibrium from external developments, and increasingly differing in terms not just of state capabilities but also of state functions to be exercised.

Especially since April 2006, with the formal Shia ascent to power in Iraq under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran entered a new cooperative era. This presented Tehran with a golden opportunity, which it immediately seized, to counter its international isolation, widen and strengthen its regional alliances, and adopt an increasingly assertive foreign policy, albeit often through asymmetric instruments, notably the financial and military role of both state (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - IRGC) and transnational (Hezbollah) actors, in the region's proxy wars. This took the shape of a so-called transnational and cross-sectarian Iran-led 'axis of resistance' (against the West, Israel and Arab Sunni Gulf monarchies), that could count on Sunni non-state actors (Hamas), Shia non-state actors (Hezbollah), and Arab state actors (Syria).

Unpacking the New Regional Cold War

Rather than two ideologically opposed normative claims about Arab nationalism as was the case in the 1950s/60s, when the sovereignty norm was held up by Gulf conservative monarchies against Nasser's pan-Arab allies, the New Regional Cold War revolves around the politicization of sectarianism, in a reciprocal and cyclic process of securitization, in which each side attributes sectarian motives to the other, and assesses every foreign policy

³⁹Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian persistence".

⁴⁰Hinnebusch, "Sectarianization of the Middle East". See also Salloukh, "Arab Uprisings and Geopolitics".

choice above all in this framework. This process had been in the making since 1979. The Iranian post-revolutionary regime manifestly challenged secularism and regional conservative monarchies, and exemplified the real possibility of overthrowing a dynastic regime while establishing a political system legitimised by a new religious doctrine, in this case embodied in the *velāyat-e faqīh* (Guardianship by an Islamic jurist) approach, developed by Ali Shariati and Ruholla Khomeini.⁴¹ At the same time, the gradual loss of hegemonic claims by Egypt after the 1967 defeat and, even more so, after the 1979 peace deal with Israel paved the way for the creation in 1981 of a more cohesive Sunni bloc under the aegis of the GCC. The threat posed by the Iranian revolutionary credentials in the 1980s and the phasing out of Egyptian leadership claims in the same decade enabled the Saudi kingdom to stake out regional leadership claims, grounded on solid financial resources, local and regional clients, and a reasonable degree of political stability.

The New Regional Cold War features increasingly heterarchical elements, illustrating the simultaneous concentration and dispersion of power in the region. At the domestic level, they include the privatization of coercion, the retreat of the state from the monopoly of violence, the intensification of the sectarianization process, and the multiplication of centres of power.

At the regional level, they range from the proliferation of conflicts turning into proxy wars, to the multiplication of non-state actors taking sides in the confrontation or acting as spoilers, to the multiple power rankings within the region's numerous hierarchies.

The New Regional Cold War is premised on a securitized rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia alongside several axes of competition and multiple rankings. The transformation of this relationship from rivals into enemies has occurred in the last fifteen years and has become the defining conflict shaping the MENA regional security complex. The Gulf subcomplex has shown an unprecedented capacity to influence security dynamics in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt) and the Maghreb (Libya and to a lesser extent Morocco and Tunisia), drawing regional non-Arab players (Turkey) and international powers (Russia, the US and several European countries) into regional proxy wars, most notably in Syria, but also in Libya and Yemen.

The two geopolitical blocs have accused each other of sectarianizing not just the Gulf, but the whole region. In light of these dynamics, in the last decade sectarianism has been transformed into a defining regional cleavage, orienting other political and geopolitical cleavages, and acting almost as an ordering principle. This has been enabled by its pervasive presence in Arab leaders' official rhetoric and its successful appropriation and re-appropriation among wide strata of both Shia and Sunni populations. Ussama Makdisi powerfully argues in this respect that, in recent times, sectarianism in both its local and foreign agency, has been employed by various Arab and foreign leaders not as an objective signifier of violence, but as an ideological signifier of a particular form of violence.⁴²

The extreme politicization of a confrontation depicted as zero-sum has had a twofold purpose: as a diversionary tactic of domestically vulnerable Gulf monarchies to divert attention away from their democratic and economic shortcomings, and as a catalyst to foster intra-bloc cohesion, especially within the GCC. While the 2011 uprisings stirred a counter-revolutionary response from conservative monarchies, spanning from Morocco to

⁴¹Al Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*.

⁴²Makdisi, "Mythology of Sectarian Middle East".

Jordan and the Gulf monarchies, in an arc uniting a “pan-royal epistemic community”,⁴³ this has not been sufficient to avoid intra-GCC rifts. Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s relations with Qatar turned sour in 2014, exponentially so in June 2017. This cleavage reflects the second dimension of the NRCW beyond sectarianization, namely the ideational confrontation over the norms of political Islam.

The deterioration of Iranian-Saudi relations – something that has been depicted by some as an Islamic Cold War⁴⁴ – worsened with the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain and the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh considered both to be Iranian initiatives, similar in intention and goal to the week-long protests in Qatif and Al-Bahr Ahsa in November 1979. The official Saudi narrative downplayed, if not ignored altogether, the initially cross-sectarian nature of the protests, which had been met by the Bahraini regime in an appeasing mode until the intensification of Saudi pressures.⁴⁵

This intensification should be understood as a part of Riyadh’s wider geopolitical considerations. Since the Bahraini turmoil, Saudi official media have increasingly depicted Iran as a dual security threat and have created a demonized enemy attempting to impose regional hegemony. In particular, two elements have been brought together to create this powerful image: the transnational dimension of Twelver Shiism and the aggressive Persian foreign policy orientation of the Islamic Republic. From this point of view, the solidarity shown by Tehran with Bahraini Shia was interpreted as an instrumental tactic aimed at overthrowing the Bahraini monarchy and threatening Saudi and Qatari strategic interests from a closer distance.⁴⁶ The democratic credentials of the protests in Bahrain were questioned, as their calls for change were attributed to Tehran and its Shia agenda, and local protesters were depicted as mere loudspeakers for Tehran. In particular, the Iranian Republic was accused of wanting to transform the Arab Gulf into several Shia provinces, directly linked to Tehran.⁴⁷ In this respect, the alleged overarching Iranian strategic goal was not the diffusion of Shiism *per se*, but rather the re-establishment of Persian hegemony over Arab lands, as it was before the coming of the Prophet. In this view, Bahrain represented only a step in a wider Persian project of expansionism, which started in 1971 with the occupation of the three Emirati islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs.⁴⁸

Within this view, the sectarian dimension of Iranian foreign policy can only be understood in conjunction with the Islamic Republic’s regional ambitions, based on alliances with Shia forces, and intending to institutionalize sectarianism (*tā’ifiyya*) as the dominant social and political norm across the region.⁴⁹

The post-2011 GCC: between integration and fragmentation

If threats travel more easily with geographic proximity, the revolts in Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern province rang alarm bells not only in Riyadh but also within the GCC. The perceived Iranian sponsored ‘fifth columns’ of Shia populations in both countries initially

⁴³A term used by Yom in “Authoritarian monarchies as epistemic community”.

⁴⁴Koelbl *et al.*, “The Cold War of Islam”.

⁴⁵Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*.

⁴⁶El Amri, “Bahrain: pearl of the Arab Gulf”.

⁴⁷Al Atibi, “It’s not sectarianism”.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Al Dakhil, “Iran: the sectarian role disappoints”, 9. For similar considerations on ‘Persian ambitions’ in Iraq and Saudi’s non-sectarian attitude, see Kawtharani, “Saudi Arabia’s enticements”.

spurred an intra-monarchical bandwagoning effect, with the 2011 Peninsula Shield military intervention in Bahrain, the invitation extended by the GCC to the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies to join the organisation, and the signature of the Joint Security Agreement in November 2012 among GCC+2 (Jordan and Morocco) Interior Ministers. The agreement, supposedly targeting counter-terrorism, paved the way for online regional cross-policing among Sunni monarchies in order to repress domestic dissent.⁵⁰

The attempted enlargement of the monarchical axis to the Levant and Maghreb bypassed the Arab League, and although it never materialized, remains a symbolically powerful reminder of Saudi-led counter-revolutionary efforts. With the first electoral victories of the Islamist *Ennahda* in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the previous focus on counter-revolutionary regime security took a new turn and two dimensions merged: the perception of potential regime insecurity was now driven both by revolutionary societal forces in the region and the role of Islamist political actors capitalising on these post-revolutionary configurations. *Ennahda* won the first democratic elections in Tunisia in October 2011 and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012, inaugurating the first democratic presidential mandate with an Islamist head of state. Saudi King Abdullah reacted by withholding funding and freezing bilateral relations with both countries. This fractured the intra-GCC camp, given Qatari proximity to the Muslim Brothers, something which worsened when the military waged a coup in Egypt in July 2013 and Saudi Arabia and the UAE accused Qatar of hosting Brotherhood figures and preachers. This led to the first spat between Qatar and the core of the GCC, with some members (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait) withholding their ambassadors from Doha between March and November 2014, only restoring diplomatic ties when Qatar allegedly promised diminished support for the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵¹ The rapprochement conveniently took place in November 2014, a month prior to the annual GCC meeting scheduled in Doha.

The second Qatar crisis began in June 2017 when the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini and Egyptian governments turned against Qatar, imposing a diplomatic standoff and a *de facto* blockade on Doha. The anti-Qatar quartet released a list of demands (initially thirteen, later reduced to six), with a July 2017 deadline that Doha let pass, amid regional (mostly led by Kuwait, and to a lesser extent Oman) and international (led by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson) diplomatic efforts to defuse the crisis. The Saudi-Emirati anti-Brotherhood axis has struggled to include other regional powers beyond the quartet: North African and Levant states, even financially dependent ones such as Jordan, have hedged and remained neutral. Other regional powerhouses, such as Turkey, have gone the extra mile and sent military forces to defend Qatar's sovereignty, thereby further fragmenting established norms of Gulf security.⁵² The way in which the escalation of the crisis against Qatar has been played out by Saudi Arabia and the UAE has had the unintended, but not counter-intuitive, side-effect of pushing Iran to reach out not only to Qatar, but also to Oman and Kuwait, further reducing the cohesiveness of the Arab Gulf's balancing against Iran.

As recounted by Achcar, since its independence from Britain in 1971, Qatar has sought to preserve some room for manoeuvre for itself in regional diplomacy.⁵³ This became more visible once Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani came to power in 1995 and managed good

⁵⁰Yom, "Collaboration and Community".

⁵¹Aboudi *et al.*, "Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain end rift".

⁵²Lynch, "Three big lessons of Qatar crisis".

⁵³Achcar, "Campaign against Qatar".

relations with both the United States – the most important American military base in the region is located at Al Udeid, in Qatar – and the Islamic Republic, with which it shares the world's largest gas field (North Dome in Qatar, South Pars in Iran). Qatar maintained its constructive diplomacy with opposing actors (the US and Iran, Israel and Hamas, Gulf monarchies and the Brotherhood), even when Saudi Arabia broke off relations with the Brotherhood – which it had supported from its inception in 1928 – after the Brotherhood denounced the US intervention to defend Kuwait in 1990. Not only did Qatar continue diplomatic relations with the Brotherhood, it gave them a sympathetic media platform, Al Jazeera, and after the coup against Morsi in 2013 offered many Brothers refuge. For Riyadh, that was the gravest sin Doha could commit. After the 2014 peak of the intra-GCC conflict, Qatar mended ties and participated in the Saudi military campaign against Saleh in Yemen, supported the Syrian opposition along with the Saudis and Emiratis, and overall kept a lower profile.

A particularly relevant external contingent factor (the different US policy under Trump with respect to that of Obama) has propelled a new round of conflict, which in June 2017 fractured the intra-Sunni consensus. This left Turkey taking sides with Qatar, Kuwait mediating, and Iran, whose privileged relations with Doha cannot be jeopardised given the magnitude of shared economic interests, emboldened. The continuation of the underbalancing of Iran has been favoured by the 2014 and 2017 intra-Sunni divisions within the Gulf subcomplex, which have eroded the cohesiveness of the Arab Gulf, led extra-Gulf actors in to the subcomplex's security dynamics and projected an image of norm fragmentation and multiplicity of enemies to the detriment of prospects for further regionalism.⁵⁴

The heterarchic features of the NRCW have been amplified by the activation of the two regional cleavages – the politicization of sectarianism along the Saudi-Iran axis, and the intra-Sunni cleavage around the norm of political Islam. Without a prioritisation of threats responding to alliance patterns or region-building logics, this has increased the fragmentation of both the normative and the political regional order.

Cleavages behind the regional proxy wars

The New Regional Cold War has played out in several contexts and manifests itself in transforming civil conflicts into regional ones. After the summer of 2011, Syria quickly morphed into both a civil war and a proxy conflict. On this military front, Iran, with the international protective umbrella offered by Russia, has massively intervened in support of Bashar Al Assad, counting on the military and logistical help of Hezbollah, which thereby lost its painfully acquired post-sectarian credentials.⁵⁵

Syria was followed by the conflict that erupted in post-Qadhafi Libya, where Qatar threw its weight behind the Islamist Libyan Dawn, which then created a UN-backed government in Tripoli, challenged by militarized dissidents led by General Khalifa Haftar, a former general heading the nationalist camp, supported by the UAE and Egypt. This second military front is a predominantly Arab one, Gulf-led, centred around another element of political identity, that is political Islam. This conflict epitomises on a military level the intra-Sunni and intra-Gulf division between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other.

⁵⁴Gause explores the ongoing underbalancing of Iran in "Ideologies, Alignments and Underbalancing".

⁵⁵Valbjørn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War".

The third proxy conflict of the new Cold War has been raging in Yemen. In March 2015, Saudi troops entered the neighbouring country in the wake of the Houthi forces' conquest of the capital, Sanaa, and the escape to the north of Mansour Hadi, president in power since the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh, now allied with the Houthis. Despite a strong pro-Houthi rhetoric, some military training offered through Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guards and small weapon transfers through Oman, Iran has, until mid-2017, fallen short of intervening to the extent Western powers and Saudi Arabia have in propping up Hadi.⁵⁶

What had been planned by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a *blitzkrieg* has turned into what many define as Saudi Arabia's 'Vietnam war', with almost 3 million Yemenis internally displaced, and over 10,000 Yemeni and 100 Saudis dead.⁵⁷ This aggressive foreign policy posture has been justified at the domestic level, with the new King Salman, in power since January 2015, eager to pave the way to succession for his son, Mohammed bin Salman, who waged the war in Yemen shortly after being nominated Defence Minister.

As with Libya and Yemen, the case of Syria shows the extent to which states in the region have shown a high degree of permeability as a function of the successful framing of trans-state identity claims. It also shows how revolutionary Shiism or Wahhabism are deemed to be able to influence the religious and political legitimacy of Iran and Saudi Arabia and their authority to act as legitimate representatives of Islam and the Islamic *umma*.

In an apparent reversal of its previously staunch anti-Shia policy in Iraq (notably, anti-Al Maliki), Riyadh sent an ambassador back to Baghdad in early 2016 for the first time in two decades as part of a broader strategy of engaging with some Iraqi Shia communities and building a post-sectarian discourse. At that time, according to some commentators, Riyadh was ready to supersede, if not abandon, a sectarian rhetoric against Iran and frame the Iranian threat as a Persian one, posed against a pan-Arab norm. This tactic did not bear fruits and the Saudi ambassador was recalled after his speeches were considered to have overstepped his diplomatic room for manoeuvre.⁵⁸ With the exception of this short period of time, the increasingly competitive nature of the region's identity environment has been characterised by reciprocal attempts by Tehran and Riyadh to discredit or vilify each other's religious authority claims, while emphasizing or praising their own, and the deployment of a number of strategies and policy tools in an increasingly zero-sum game where the overall geopolitical framework has become dominated by a friend vs foe logic.⁵⁹

The evolution of the New Regional Cold War has displayed a trend toward a regional heterarchical configuration, characterised by multiple power rankings, multiple actors and multiple levels of governance. Much of the GCC's identification of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the major threat to domestic and Gulf stability has failed to drive Arab Gulf states' foreign policies consistently, as other cleavages, notably over the norms of political Islam, have increased their salience and produced shifts in threat perception and subsequent balancing behaviour.

Conclusion

Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Gulf subcomplex, including Iran, Iraq and Gulf Arab states, has been on the rise in terms of its capacity to influence the Levant, North Africa

⁵⁶Hiltermann and Longley Alley, "The Houthis are not Hezbollah".

⁵⁷Pillar, "Entanglement in Yemen"; Shaheen, "Yemen death toll has reached 10,000".

⁵⁸Kawtharani, "Saudi Arabia's Enticements".

⁵⁹Wiktowicz, on the basis of his study of Al Qaeda, "Framing Jihad".

and the regional order configuration. What has taken shape since then, however, is a New Regional Cold War hinging on two main dimensions: the return of divisive identity politics under the guise of politicized sectarianism, exacerbating the meddling of transnational and extra-regional actors; and an intra-Sunni contest mostly driven by the Arab Gulf over the norms of political Islam.

The former has been justified on a rhetorical level by reciprocal accusations between Iran and Saudi Arabia of sectarian-driven expansionism. However, rather than representing the only cleavage ordering the friend-enemy relations of regional geopolitics, the intra-Sunni fractures between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the reshaping of allegiances this spat has created, have multiplied the rankings and the criteria that determine the way in which the Gulf subcomplex will evolve.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's constant, twofold threat perception with varying degrees of intensity of, on the one hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially since the 2015 international agreement on the country's nuclear program and, on the other, the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its ejection from power in Egypt in 2013, has led to a regional order that is neither anarchic nor hierarchic, but one in which threat perceptions and regional alignments change rapidly and different actors occupy different ranking positions according to the issue area.

As far as rankings go, a struggle for primacy among competing political identities can be identified. On the one hand, Qatar, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood have long stood for Sunni political Islam and its political legitimacy across the region. On the other hand, sectarian allegiances separate Gulf countries plus North Africa from Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Iraq.

In terms of regional proxy wars, Iran and Hezbollah, with the help of Russia, seem to have the upper hand in Syria, having kept Bashar Al Assad in power for over six years. The opposing camp, headed by Saudi Arabia, and actively counting on the GCC and Turkey, has so far been losing the battle on the ground, as well as the soft power advantage in winning hearts and minds internationally in terms of imagining a post-Assad Syria. In Libya, both Egypt and the UAE, in light of their strong anti-Brotherhood attitude, have remained strongly pro-Haftar, with Saudi Arabia keeping a lower profile. Lastly, in Yemen, Iran, especially in the form of the IRGC has increasingly supported the Houthis, while Saudi Arabia has been trapped in a long and costly conflict in support of Hadi, and laments the limited engagement of many of its coalition partners, including Qatar and Egypt.

The presence of heterarchic features speaks to the inability of any single power to order the region, and to the lack of a single ranking principle (material capabilities, power projection, identity norms, soft power) that is widely considered the decisive one. The absence of agreement over the relative importance of one ranking over others will likely result in further diplomatic crises, bickering, rifts, and an overall fragmentation of a regional order that suffers from centrifugal tendencies.

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