

THE ROLE OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) COUNTRIES IN COUNTERING THE IRANIAN THREATS FOR PROMOTING THEIR COMMON SECURITY IN MARITIME DOMAIN

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Abstract: Iran policies pose threats to the security of the Gulf. The Gulf region has witnessed a noticeable tension, as Iran attacked several civilian ships of the Gulf states in an undeclared manner. The GCC countries made major efforts and some joint responses to such threats to achieve maritime security in the Gulf. The current study aims to focus on the role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in responding to the Iranian threats to maintain their common security in the Gulf maritime domain, which based on the Idea: Iran poses threats to the security in the Gulf, which is prompting the GCC countries for more cooperation and to respond decisively to these threats to maintain their common security in the Gulf maritime domain. This showed that there is an urgent need to strengthen the ties of the Gulf countries to each other, unite and alliance in order to create a military naval coalition which helps to balance power and threat with Iran and provides protection for Gulf waters from any Iranian threats in the maritime domain of the region.

Keywords: GCC, Maritime security, Maritime Domain, Gulf Security, Energy Security, Iran, Security, Arabian Gulf, Navy. Balance of power, Balance of threat.

دور دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي في مواجهة التهديدات الإيرانية لتعزيز أمنها المشترك في المجال البحري

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المستخلص: السياسات الإيرانية تهدد أمن الخليج. وشهدت منطقة الخليج توتراً ملحوظاً، حيث هاجمت إيران عدة سفن مدنية لدول الخليج بشكل غير معلن. بذلت دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي جهوداً كبيرة وبعض الردود المشتركة على مثل هذه التهديدات؛ لتحقيق الأمن البحري في الخليج. هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى التركيز على دور دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي في الاستجابة للتهديدات الإيرانية للحفاظ على أمنها المشترك في المجال البحري الخليجي، والتي تستند إلى فكرة: إيران تشكل تهديدات للأمن في الخليج. الأمر الذي يدفع دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي لمزيد من التعاون والاستجابة بشكل حاسم لهذه التهديدات للحفاظ على أمنها المشترك في المجال البحري الخليجي. وأظهر ذلك أن هناك حاجة ماسة لتقوية أواصر دول الخليج مع بعضها البعض، والتوحيد والتحالف من أجل إنشاء تحالف عسكري بحري عسكري يساعد على موازنة القوة والتهديد مع إيران، ويوفر الحماية لمياه الخليج من أي تهديدات إيرانية. في المجال البحري للمنطقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي، الأمن البحري، المجال البحري، أمن الخليج، أمن الطاقة، إيران، الأمن، الخليج العربي، البحرية. ميزان القوى، ميزان التهديد.

CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the theoretical base for analysing and realizing the role of the GCC to maintain their common security in the Gulf maritime domain with a focus on the balance of threat theory.

The content analysis approach was applied in the study where an overview of the current situation was analysed first before going beyond the threats through reviewing previous articles and political studies as well as regional agreements. In addition, the descriptive approach was highly applied along with critical analysis and commentary on each of the issues discussed.

in light of the threats imposed on the GCC countries and within the growing power of Iran in the region, the GCC countries have been forced to increase their military and political power and expand maritime influence. Reviewing the balance of threat theory, it turns out that the theory is appropriate to explain the GCC countries perception of Iranian threat and the efforts made by the GCC countries e.g. increasing military power and influence, as well as their alliances with powerful countries to increase their levels of power in a way that achieves a balance in the threat and power between them and Iran and other countries.

The Neorealism theory could also be used to explain the nature of the threats that surround the GCC countries as well as the sources of these threats and how they changed the international alliances in the region.

CHAPTER TWO: THE IRANIAN THREATS TO THE GCC COUNTRIES

1. Introduction

Iran has been posing real military, security and intelligence threats to the GCC countries. Iran is considered an unusual country with an asymmetric power where most of its threatening capabilities are represented by its policies and activities to back proxy groups in the Middle East. Besides, it has an

advanced military capability including cruise and ballistic missiles along with naval capabilities. Iran has established its Quds Force and has recruited its channels to pose intelligence threats in the region. By comparison to Iran, the GCC states have several advantages over Iran, investing considerably more in their defence and providing conventional military powers armed with much more sophisticated and capable military systems.⁽¹⁾ Despite those advantages and due to some political differences between GCC countries, some GCC countries maintain more friendly relations with Iran, such as Qatar and Oman. Whereas Iran poses a serious threat to GCC countries by asymmetric means, the GCC patient strategy to avoid conflict is one that prevents military confrontation with Iran, which GCC regards as lose-lose conflict, and instead pursuing to increase security and military competences that enable it to deter Iran and maintaining regional stability.

2. Developing Proxy Warfare by Iran

The use of proxies by Iran to create threats by transferring weapons and money was instrumental in Iran's performance during the Iran-Iraq war, and in the long run changed Iranian strategy.⁽²⁾ Experts argue that it is hard to overestimate the power of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 in shaping Iran's warfare strategy. The conflict cemented Iran's doctrinal focus on three key factors, which are proxy warfare, asymmetric warfare (particularly in naval defensive strategy) and ballistic missiles – in addition to internal defensive line and preservation of the regime. The 1980s Iran-Iraq war has shown that conventional Iranian units were poorly performing under much weaker Iraqi military power, but Iran shocked Iraq through discovering its niche in asymmetric war.⁽³⁾

When former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein attacked Iran, he presumed that the divided Iranian populations would swiftly surrender to Iraq after the turmoil of the Iranian Revolution, and would not put up a fight. During the (IRGC) was established as a domestic security force upgraded into a second military.⁽⁴⁾ As Seth Jones, the Manager of the Transnational Threats Project, states, "Iran's comparative advantage has turned into its capacity to work with governmental and non-governmental actors – an

(1) Cordesman, A and Harrington, N. "The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance". Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/arab-gulf-states-and-iran-military-spending-modernization-and-shifting-military-balance>

(2) Jones, S. "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>.

(3) Connell, M. "Iran's Military Doctrine", United States Institute of Peace, 2010. Available at: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>

(4) Donovan, M., Carl, N., and Kagan, F. W. "Iran's Reserve of Last Resort", *Critical Threats*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/irans-reserve-of-last-resort-uncovering-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-ground-forces-order-of-battle>

unconventional policy guided by the IRGC, including the IRGC-QF, instead of traditional Iranian military forces (Artesh).⁽⁵⁾ Iran also moved to a plan to support Shia Iraqi militant groups, the most prominent of which was the Badr Brigade, the military arm of the Badr Organization. The conflict between Iran and Iraq has shown Iran that its challenge is not in traditional warfare, but asymmetrical proxy war. Through realizing the fact that Iraq is mostly a nation with a Shia majority population, Iran equipped and provided weapons to Iraqi Shia militias, presenting a security threat to attack Iraqi forces, and then attacking US soldiers.⁽⁶⁾

These lessons experienced during the Iran-Iraq war made the region aware of Iran's use of Iraqi Shia terrorist groups after the US invasion to Iraq in 2003, targeting US soldiers by directly funding and arming Iraqi Shia militant groups to tie down the US military in Iraq. In 2007, President Bush reported that Tehran supplied military aids, which include mortar shells and components of technologically advanced roadside bombs, to militants in Iraq who turned to attack and kill US forces.⁽⁷⁾ The United States attributed the killing of 600 troops in Iraq to Iran-supported movements and held Iran's IRGC-QF responsible for such deaths. Iran's tactics in Iraq involved covert operations by proxy movements to deter the US from accusing Iran of supporting Iraqi Shia terrorist groups for targeting US forces.⁽⁸⁾ US officials said that they could trace serial numbers on mortars, missile-propelled grenades, and Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs) to sites across the border but avoided blaming the Iranian government. Iran used Iraq as a buffer zone and a first line of defence against foreign invasion. Iranian actions in Iraq were designed to exploit the existing conflict through proxy groups and bleed US forces so that the United States would not venture attacking Iran after hardly stabilizing Iraq.⁽⁹⁾

A study by the Council of Foreign Relations strengthens this idea as some have called Iran's policy one of "controlled chaos": enough turmoil to lock up US troops in Iraq but still not enough to engulf Iraq's neighbours in a broader sectarian conflict. The director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program Michael Eisenstadt says of such a policy: "To a degree, this keeps [US forces] tied down and not available for use in Iran." Iranian policy throughout its tenure in Iraq illustrates Iran's desire to

(5) Schieffer, B., Schwartz, A. and Jones, S. "The Attack on Saudi Arabia", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020.

Available at: <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/truth-matter/attack-saudi-arabia>

(6) Filkins, D. The shadow commander. *The New Yorker*, 2013, 30. Available at:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>

(7) Cordesman, Anthony H., Emma Davies, and Elizabeth Detwiler. *Success Or Failure?: Iraq's Insurgency and Civil Violence and US Strategy: Developments Through June 2007*. CSIS, 2007.

(8) Baker, P., Bergman, R., Kirkpatrick, D., Barnes, J. and Rubin, A. "Seven Days in January: How Trump Pushed U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War", *New York Times*, 11 January, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/us/politics/iran-trump.html>.

(9) Anderson, S. "Iran's Proxy Threat Is the Real Problem Now", *Foreign Policy*, 10 January, 2020. Available at:

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/10/iran-proxy-threat-hezbollah-middle-east/>

avoid direct confrontation with forces such as the United States, but instead demonstrates its use of asymmetric warfare to discourage the government by supplying Shia proxy groups with mortars, rockets and guns.⁽¹⁰⁾

The Iranian strategy in Yemen is similar to its strategy in Iraq: it involved financing, training and equipping Shia proxy groups to manipulate an existing conflict to deter regional actors such as KSA and UAE, the strongest GCC states with hawkish views towards Iran. The Yemeni conflict has its origins in the uprisings of the Arab Spring that forced Yemen's President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to give up power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in 2011. Hadi has addressed a range of issues in Yemen such as the Houthi groups run by the minority Zaidi Shia of Yemen. The Houthis gained control of the province's heartland in the northern region of Saada and later attempted to take control of the whole country, pressuring President Hadi to escape. Members of the GCC, notably KSA and UAE, and other Arab states have started a military campaign in Yemen to restore the legal Hadi's government. Iran's IRGC and Quds Force also supported the Houthis, with the Houthis utilizing Iranian missiles and drones to assault ships along the Bab-el Mandeb Strait and the south of the Red Sea, and strike land-based sites in KSA and the UAE. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is situated between Djibouti and Yemen on the southern end of the Red Sea where it acquired its strategic significance as around five million barrels of oil flow through it daily. Seth Jones claims that "Iran's goals in Yemen involve retaining – and perhaps increasing – the influence of Iran along the Red Sea, and threatening KSA and the UAE."⁽¹¹⁾

3. The Military Power of Iran

After years of sanctions, Iran has no option but to devote itself to developing its military capacities through domestic manufacturing and covert acquisition of key pieces of foreign military hardware, unlike its Gulf neighbours.

Iran's two central military means of harming the area are its capabilities in missiles and its naval capabilities. "Although Iran has not yet evaluated or launched a missile capable of hitting the United States, it aims to refine longer-range missile capabilities under the auspices of its space-launch programme", according to the CSIS Missile Defence Program⁽¹²⁾. In terms of increasing the amount of its missile arsenal, Iran is continuing to invest in qualitative improvements to the accuracy and lethality of its

(10) Beenher, L. and Bruni, G. "Iran's Involvement in Iraq", Council on Foreign Relations, 2008. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/irans-involvement-iraq>.

(11) Jones, S. "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East". Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>.

(12) Johnson, John D. *Iranian Ballistic Missile Threat and a Phased, Adaptive Approach for Missile Defense in Europe: Perceptions, Policies and Scenarios*. George C Marshall Center Apo Ae 09053 European Center For Security Studies, 2010.

missiles. "Iran has invested in new missile abilities such as moving toward more solid fuel, accuracy and precision, and anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles."⁽¹³⁾

After the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, especially after realizing the significance of defensive weapons, Iran decided to boost its missile power. Iran resorted to China and North Korea for its missile capabilities, buying 200-300 Scud-B and-C missiles, with the-C missiles sufficient to threaten GCC states and their US allies across the region. Iran turned back to North Korea in the 1990s, allowing it to buy more missiles capable of targeting Israel, and Saudi Arabia's western part. Iran has also perfected its Shahab-3 missiles, now known as Ghadr, increasing its range by 1, 600 km, which can be used to threaten any of Iran's regional adversaries including Israel. Moreover, Iran put a big effort during the recent decade to improve the destroying effect and range of its missiles, managing to develop several semi-guided missiles like Fateh-110. The range of the Fateh-110 is set at 200-250 km. Iran has been seeking to produce highly accurate missiles to have better outcomes during any upcoming conflicts; this is clear through the vast development of Fateh-110 missile family. Iran still lacks capabilities to track and evaluate damage from missiles, as demonstrated in June 2017 when Iran fired seven Zolfaghar missiles against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. Just two of the missiles exploded in the regions in question. Despite the poor performance of the missile, Iran has proved that it was capable of flying surveillance drones above the suspected target and relaying that information to remote launch crews.⁽¹⁴⁾

Iran has focused in recent years on developing missile accuracy. Michael Elleman, Senior Fellow for Missile Defence at the IISS, notes that, The 'mosaic defence strategy' written by Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, leader of Iran's IRGC, points out three asymmetric offensive strategies to thwart an attacker's conventional military advances: proxies provide a forward-based fighting force; guerrilla warfare at sea threatens enemies and impedes a navy-supported invasion; and the implicit threat of extraterritorial attacks with ballistic missiles deters adversaries.⁽¹⁵⁾ Short- and medium-range missiles would threaten the security of key ports serving GCC states' navies and their allies, such as the US. Iranian ballistic missiles could also strike airfields that are critical to Gulf States and the United States operations, if their missiles were to strike with precision. In addition, assuming Iran is developing an accurate missile, Iran could use these missiles to strike key military and civilian infrastructure, such as targeting desalination plants in the Gulf, which would cause shortage in most of the country's waters. Should Iran develop highly accurate ballistic missiles and technologies such as real-time targeting and damage assessment capabilities, like the recent Iranian attacks on ARAMCO company in Saudi Arabia. Drones and cruise

(13) Ibid.

(14) Cordesman, A. "The Iranian Missile Threat", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-missile-threat>

(15) Elleman, M. "Iran's Missile Priorities after the Nuclear Deal", International Institute for Security Studies, 2020. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/-/media/images/comment/analysis/2017/december/6-elleman2125.pdf>

missiles were used to fly in low altitudes and conducted strike against the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil-processing plants at Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia on 14 September 2019. The Houthi movement in Yemen claimed responsibility by linking it to events surrounding Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemen War and saying that they used ten drones in the attack.⁽¹⁶⁾

The naval capabilities of Iran are a major challenge, characterized by distributed firepower through the use of small boats and rapid attack capabilities, and anti-access denial capabilities for the Gulf area. By procuring modern sea mines and anti-ship missiles, and many small boats, fast attack crafts, and midget submarines, Iran has built up its navy. Iran operates many types of submarines including the Russian Kilo class, the Gadir submarines designed and manufactured by North Korea, and the Qaaem, Fateh, and Nahang boats designed and manufactured by Iran. Iran wants to maintain its ability to influence the maritime environment and to that end it has invested heavily in asymmetric capabilities, including hundreds of deadly small craft and a network of coastal-defence cruise missiles, as well as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or armed drones that could potentially support the accurate targeting of adversary naval forces.⁽¹⁷⁾

The Strait of Hormuz is incredibly important because it carries 30 to 35 per cent of the world's crude oil. Iran has repeatedly threatened to close down the strait when US oil sanctions were imposed. Notwithstanding these credible threats, Iran does not have a naval forces capable of operating globally and has roamed only to China and South Africa.⁽¹⁸⁾

Iran presented a major naval threat to Gulf stability in February 2019 after its claims to have successfully tested an anti-ship cruise missile from a domestically built submarine. This missile launch presents an increase in the risk to any ships passing in the Gulf. Iran appears to have fired a Fateh Underwater Nasr-1 anti-ship rocket. This is worrying as, the Nasr-1 has a range of about 30 km and can cripple ships of up to about 1, 500 tons, such as a corvette or coastal merchant ship.⁽¹⁹⁾ Iran's claim to have launched an anti-ship missile from a submarine is threatening security in the Gulf, particularly as Iran has been subjected to years of international sanctions designed to limit its military capabilities.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Roblin, S. "Iran Wants Its Submarines to Sink America's Navy In A War", *National Interest*, 26 December, 2019. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/iran-wants-its-submarines-sink-americas-navy-war-108661>.

(18) Ghaddar, A. "FACTBOX-Strait of Hormuz: the world's most important oil artery", Reuters, 23 April, 2019. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-iran-oil-strait/factbox-strait-of-hormuz-the-worlds-most-important-oil-artery-idUSL5N2254EM>.

(19) Miller, J. "Iran's new threat to ships in the Gulf", International Institute for Security Studies, Analysis, 6 March, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/03/iran-new-anti-ship-missile-test>.

4. Intelligence Power of Iran

The IRGC has a broad intelligence operation that pose a threat to the GCC countries. In addition, IRGC has a specific Quds Force which plays an important role in enabling Iran to undertake asymmetric warfare abroad by using proxies. Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, Hamas, Syria and Yemen have been supported by the Quds Force.⁽²⁰⁾ Anthony Cordesman discusses how Quds Force troops are split into specific groups or entities for each country or region of their service: there are Iraq Directorates; Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan; Afghanistan, Pakistan and India; Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula. Iran's Quds Force is one of its most powerful capabilities; it is the Iranian intellectual unit that specializes in unconventional, asymmetric warfare that uses proxy groups to exploit existing conflicts across the borders. The Quds Force enabled Iran to intervene in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and to maintain close relations with Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁽²¹⁾

The Quds Force in Iran presents an intelligence threat by disseminating misinformation across the world, particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia. Iran used the Shiite community of Saudi Arabia to stir instability. Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's first Supreme Leader, criticized Saudi Arabia for having pro-Western ties after the Iranian revolution and the fall of the Shah. Khomeini has prompted Muslims to condemn Saudi Arabia for unfitting guardianship over Mecca and Medina's holiest Muslim cities and called into question the Islamic religious legitimacy of Saudi Arabia. Some of the Shia in Saudi Arabia started speaking on behalf of Khomeini, and in the Eastern Province Shia and Saudi security forces clashed during the years 1979-80. Iran has been involved for many years in a political propaganda against Saudi Arabia, causing security tensions within the Saudi society and taking advantage of the Shia minority among the of Saudi citizens.⁽²²⁾

In the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring of 2011-2012, Iran also tried to promote unrest and instability⁽²³⁾. Although Shiite Muslims in Saudi Arabia face no discrimination, Iranian covert intervention can also be linked to the 2011-2012 uprising. Iran used deception and propaganda war to manipulate the feelings of the Saudi Shi'a minority, which posed a security threat in Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring uprisings gave the Iranian intelligence forces the perfect opportunity to provoke more unrest in the region, using the same propaganda to promote unrest among the Shiites in Bahrain by their intelligence.

(20) Defence Intelligence Agency. "Iran Military Power", August, 2019. Available at: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf.

(21) Jones, S. "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 11 March, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>.

(22) Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: a minority in search of cultural authenticity." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 121-138.

(23) Chubin, Shahram. "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated." *GRC Gulf Papers* (2012): 21-27.

5. Iran Maritime Threat to the GCC Countries

Iran has threatened to disrupt oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, causing shocking repercussions for India, China and dozens of other countries that import crude oil in the Middle East in large quantities. Although Iranian threats are often hidden, they are not always so. Ismail June Kothari, a high-ranking officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, stated on 4 June 2017 that Iran will prevent the export of oil of other countries through the Strait of Hormuz, in the event that its oil exports are banned under US sanctions.⁽²⁴⁾

However, Iranian leaders have never implemented their threats to close the strait. There is no doubt that this is partly due to political considerations: Iran knows that it will become internationally isolated, and even China will not support Iran if it tries to close the strait. The US believes that keeping this vital corridor open is a fundamental national interest, and that the Iranian regime will be quickly defeated if it encounters a military confrontation⁽²⁵⁾. For this reason, the Iranian naval doctrine is looking to gain the ability to close the Strait of Hormuz through asymmetric forces. The skills Iran acquired to threaten the Gulf extended to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, especially since 2011 through its support for the Houthis in Yemen⁽²⁶⁾. The threats that Iran poses on the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab come through non-state armed actors, drones, and mines. Let's take a look at each of these threats separately:

a. Non-state armed actors

Iran has a long history of providing its proxy militias with advanced weapons systems. The Lebanese Hezbollah is the main model for these militias, but the Ansar Allah movement or the Houthis in Yemen are increasingly possessing such weapons, especially the missiles that enabled them to target the Saudi capital. In addition, the Iranians provided the Houthis with drone technology, which they also used to threaten maritime security in the Red Sea and Strait of Bab al-Mandab.

Houthi militants managed to target an Emirati ship in October 2016 with an anti-ship cruise missile off the western coast of Yemen, and in the same month, they fired several missiles at the American destroyer "USS Mason", but the American forces intercepted them⁽²⁷⁾. These missiles are believed to be the Chinese anti-ship C-801⁽²⁸⁾.

(24) IRGC official threatens to shut Strait of Hormuz, Economist, July 5, 2018, available at: <http://www.eiu.com/industry/article/1476908931/irgc-official-threatens-to-shut-strait-of-hormuz/2018-07-05>

(25) Fargher, James. "‘This Presence Will Continue Forever’: An Assessment of Iranian Naval Capabilities in the Red Sea." *Center for International Maritime Security* 5 (2017).

(26) Maashi, Haifa Ahmed Al. "From Security Governance to Geopolitical Rivalry: Iran-GCC Confrontation in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 46-63.

(27) Shay, Shaul. "The Houthi Maritime Threats in the Red Sea Basin." *Institute for Policy and Strategy* 9 (2017).

(28) Awad, Bilal O. *Insurgency In Yemen: Houthi And Insurgent Threats To Maritime Operations*. Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, United States, 2018.

The Houthis also used remote controlled boats, on 30 January 2017 and targeted a Saudi Navy frigate. According to the US Navy, this attack was carried out using a UAV, dependent on Iranian technology.⁽²⁹⁾ The Houthis also attempted to use these tactics in the economic war, targeting an ARAMCO oil distribution facilities berth in Jaizan city in the south of the Red Sea on the Saudi coast, located just north of Yemen, using a speedboat loaded with explosives.

The Iranians have the ability to respond by obstructing the maritime shipping movement. On 6 August 2018, the Iranian Fars News Agency published statements by the General of the IRGC, Nasser Shaabani, in which he indicated that Tehran had ordered the Houthis to attack two Saudi oil tankers, and that the militia had carried out these orders. Although the Iranian regime still denies responsibility for the attacks by the Houthis on international shipping traffic - and this is the goal in the first place of the presence of agents "can be disavowed" - the attack on the Saudi ship occurred at this time, a few hours after the General's statement Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, that the Red Sea is no longer safe for American ships, is not without significance.⁽³⁰⁾

b. Drones

Iran claims that it possesses a variety of unmanned aerial vehicles, which are used for surveillance and attack purposes, including "H-110 Sarir" drones, equipped with air-to-surface missiles, and "Shahed 129", which has the ability to carry out control tasks around the clock, as well as offensive missions. American estimates indicate that Iranian drones have the ability to carry weapons⁽³¹⁾.

Moreover, Iran has revealed its willingness to use unmanned aircraft technology to threaten its regional competitors in the region. This is evident in the harassment of American ships, as Tehran regularly uses speed boats to harass US Navy ships in the Gulf. However, since August 2017, Iran has stopped using speedboats, and has resorted to using "QOM-1" aircraft (also known as "Shahed 129") to make flights approaching US Navy ships operating in the region. This could be read as a message from Iran to demonstrate its growing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability. In another incident, an Iranian, unarmed, unmanned UAV penetrated the path of American combat aircraft, as it was preparing to land on a USS Nimitz aircraft carrier.

(29) Saudi Arabia foils Houthi bombing attempt on Aramco fuel terminal, The National, April 26, 2017, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/saudi-arabia-foils-houthi-bombing-attempt-on-aramco-fuel-terminal-1.20531>

(30) Panic in Iran over Attack on Two Saudi Oil Carriers, Asharq Al-Awsat, August 8, 2018, available at: <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1356646/panic-iran-over-attack-two-saudi-oil-carriers>

(31) Lolita C. Baldor, In the Persian Gulf, Iran's drones pose rising threat to US, Associated Press, August 25, 2017, available at: <https://read.bi/2nuyVam>

c. Sea Mines

Sea mines are among the oldest and least expensive types of weapons used in the seas compared to the large role they can play, which has made sea mines one of the most efficient and dangerous naval weapons.

In addition, sea mines have a major impact on freedom of navigation in the Gulf, and consequently affect the security and stability of the Gulf in all military, political, environmental and economic aspects. This is because of the economic and political importance of the Gulf not only regionally, but also at the international level, where estimates indicate that 40% of seaborne oil is transported from the Gulf, as well as the dependence of the Arab Gulf countries in their national income mainly on oil, which is issued mostly across the Gulf.

The Iranian sea mines exist in a wide assortment, including magnetically integrated lower-impact linked mines, pressure-exploding mines, mobile mines, and remote-controlled mines, as well as magnetic mines attached to ships. They are used by the Special Operations Forces.

Iranian sea mines are the most useful tool to use to block the Strait of Hormuz. Since January 2017, coalition forces, led by Saudi Arabia have discovered sea mines that the Houthis had planted in the Red Sea, near the Yemeni coast and the Bab al-Mandab strait, and have succeeded in dismantling them. In March 2017, the Houthis deployed sea mines, such as the one that targeted the Yemeni Coast Guard ship, and killed two and wounded eight of its crew.⁽³²⁾

d. Iranian sabotage

The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation revealed that four commercial cargo ships were subjected to "sabotage operations" off the coast of Fujairah near the UAE territorial waters on 12 May 2019, without giving further details or naming the suspects⁽³³⁾. It is worth noting that two Saudi oil tankers were among these four ships.

This attack came in the context of escalating regional tensions between Iran and the United States over Iran's nuclear and ballistic programmes, as well as its destabilizing regional intervention. Therefore, Iran or one of its proxies are the main suspects, and there is evidence to suggest this.

First, Hishmatullah Flahat Bishah, head of the National Security Committee in the Iranian Shura Council, wrote on his Twitter account: "The Fujairah bombings showed that the security of southern

(32) Dumitru, Gheorghe. "Further Contemplating, From A Civilian Deck, The Military Tapestry of the Middle East And North Africa (Mena). Poles of Military Power in A Region Awash in Armies, Armed Groups and Weapons, Major Factors Accentuating the Tapestry's Character As A" Work In Progress"." *Romanian Review of Political Sciences & International Relations* 17, no. 1 2020.

(33) UAE reports acts of 'sabotage' against commercial ships, CNN, accessible at: <https://cnn.it/2LF8EoQ>

(Persian) Gulf is as fragile as glass." This statement clearly reveals that Tehran is directing veiled threats to the UAE,⁽³⁴⁾ and these threats are not the first of their kind.

Second, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made a clear threat in December 2018 to block oil shipments to other countries across the Gulf: "If the Americans one day want to prevent Iranian oil exports, no oil will be exported from the (Persian) Gulf."⁽³⁵⁾ Although Iran insists on its ability to continue to export oil despite US sanctions, most countries are complying with sanctions. As Bloomberg reported on 9 May 2019, "Not a single ship has seen the Iranian oil cargo berths departed to foreign ports." Consequently, the attack that occurred off the coast of Fujairah, on 12 May 2019 could be considered as carrying out Iranian threats.⁽³⁶⁾

6. The Way Iran Threatens the GCC Countries

The GCC states have been confronting a number of security threats, from Iran. By interfering and provoking regional unrest, Iran has increased instability in the GCC countries and fostered unrest whenever possible. In Bahrain, Iran's strategy included using propaganda and arming Shia groups to create instability within the GCC to exploit the discontent of the Shia people of Bahrain. The Arab Spring erupted in Bahrain and protests by Shia protesters were seen by the government of Bahrain as a Shia rebellion in February 2011. The GCC countries saw the hand of the Iranian authorities in these protests, and in March 2011 the GCC countries sent troops of Aljazeera Shield Forces to help Bahrain squeeze down protests. As the situation increased, "some of the radical elements in the Shia community of Bahrain sought illegal assistance from Iran."⁽³⁷⁾ Iran used its intelligence capacity to take advantage of grievances in the Shia populations of Bahrain and subsequently escalated the situation by arming Shia groups, aiming to fuel the instability of the GCC and dismantle the unity within the GCC.⁽³⁸⁾

According to the analysis of the balance of threat criteria, to GCC countries backed by the U.S, Iran is the region's primary source of threat to regional instability, and any regional balance strategy should focus on preventing the risks generated by Iranian actions.

(34) Iranian lawmaker says explosions at UAE port show Gulf security is fragile, Reuters, May 12, 2019, available at: <https://reut.rs/2E56oAK>

(35) If Iran can't export oil from Gulf, no other country can, Iran's president says, Reuters, December 4, 2018, available at: <https://reut.rs/2APjqAg>

(36) "What we know of the 'sabotage' attacks off UAE's coast", Al Jazeera, 14 May 2019, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/sabotage-attacks-gulf-oil-vessels-190514184006381.html>.

(37) Mabon, Simon. "The End of the Battle for Bahrain and the Securitization of Bahraini Shi'a." *The Middle East Journal* 73, no. 1 (2019): 29-50.

(38) Kerr, S. Bahrain court convicts 139 people on terrorism-related charges. Financial Times, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/03d8f4d2-6061-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e>

There are four elements which identify perceived threat according to Walt. The four threat elements are:

- a. combined strength: Iran's population (82 million)⁽³⁹⁾ indicates its incredible amount of manpower to count on. Iran has an approximate 534, 000 active Army, Navy, Air Force and IRGC personnel. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is Iran's elite special force charged with protecting the Iranian regime from external and internal threats, apart from Artesh (Islamic Republic of Iran Army), the conventional military power of Iran. A 125, 000-man force, it also controls the Basij paramilitary militia, which has about 90, 000 active members, and runs the Quds Force foreign special operations. "The sheer size, manpower, and the brutal IRGC militants are a main reason why Iran poses a real threat to the GCC countries".⁽⁴⁰⁾ The imbalance of power between Iran and the GCC countries, where the number of Iranian military forces operating 523, 000 thousand soldiers compared to 363, 600 among the GCC countries combined, and some countries of the Council may have a qualitative advantage in some weapons, including air, for example, except that Iran's keenness On the development of new advanced generations of Iranian missiles and naval capabilities. However, international sanctions and restrictions on arms imports have made it difficult for Iran to develop or buy advanced weapons. To compensate for this imbalance, Iran developed "unconventional" weapons in order to be able to inflict losses on opponents while avoiding the traditional battlefield. These include ballistic missiles, attack drones, and a network of armed factions allied with them in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.
- b. geographic proximity: Geography, as Iran is a maritime country, which gives it a huge strategic advantage that allows it to control the vital corridors that are the main arteries of global maritime trade. The strong point of Iranian political geography is its control of the Strait of Hormuz, which is located off the Iranian coast at the entrance to the Gulf, one of the most important waterways in the world, given the huge volume of oil exports that cross it daily, as well as the huge imports of the Arab Gulf states, and the oil supply that passes through the strait constitutes about 40% of the total oil supply circulated globally, given that about 80% of the oil of the Gulf states passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, by threatening navigation in the Strait of Hormuz in any way, especially in the event of a military target, it can infect the global economy with death, but at the same time it is a weak point for Iran as it will be the first affected by it, because it is the most dependent country on the corridor to export its products. Therefore, it is not logical to implement its threats that you make from time to time in this regard.

(39) Iran Population 1960-2018 Data. *Trading Economics*. Available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/population>.

(40) Defence Intelligence Agency. "Iran Military Power", 2019. Available at: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf.

- c. offensive ability: The Iranian navy - especially the naval arm of the (IRGC) has invested in boats and weapons suited to asymmetric warfare, rather than the conflict between ships that Iran is certain to lose. So Iran, with the help of China, North Korea and Russia, bought advanced sea mines, small submarines, cruise ships, small fleets and very fast boats. The greatest threat facing the economies of the countries of the region and the oil markets is the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, either directly or through its proxies, as well as the possibility of attacking on Gulf oil production facilities, which pose the greatest threat to the GCC countries' economies. Iran has built the largest stockpile of ballistic missiles in the Middle East. Some of these rockets were made using older commonly used "Scud" designs. Other missiles, similar to the North Korean missiles can reach distances of 2, 000 km. The (IRGC) own a fleet of speedboats armed with missiles and small submarines that can be deployed in the face of warships or commercial tankers to disrupt the flow of oil through the Gulf waters. If we look at ships, tanks, and combat aircraft, Iran will look very vulnerable. But if we look at anti-ship missiles, ballistic missiles, drones, and so forth, they will look much more powerful.
- d. offensive intent: Iran believes that it has historical, geographical, ideological and political justifications for it to play the role of the leader in the region, in recognition of its own strength and natural potential and its sense of its right to lead on other countries of the region. Considering itself the leader of the Islamic world and entrusted with his defense, the constitution also stipulated the creation of the government that paves the way for the establishment of one global nation that paves the way for the absent imam (Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Mu'tadar) to establish the world government of Islam, and in the time of the absence of the imam, the guardianship of the matter and the imamate of the nation is in the hand of the imam (The Guardian Faqih). Iran deals with the Gulf states in several ways, the most important of which is Iranian superiority

After reviewing the types of threats posed by Iran to the GCC countries, the next chapter, chapter 3, shows the mechanisms through which the GCC countries can deal with such threats and how to improve their capabilities.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ROLE OF GCC COUNTRIES TO MAINTAIN THEIR COMMON SECURITY IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN

1. Introduction

The GCC countries have maritime borders, as this represents a significant comparative advantage that allows them to open up to the world and facilitate trade and transport across the sea, because they have very important resources that come from the sea, such as fishing, diving and the searching for pearls, as well as the wealth inherent in the depths of the sea bottom, such as oil and gas, or as a result of its sea

view, such as sea tourism, sea sports, port services, dry dock services, and others. You can also represent it with additional responsibility that needs to be carried out heavily in light of the escalating maritime threats such as piracy, infiltration, pollution and seawater pollution with industrial waste, etc. This requires naval forces with multiple skills and specialties, and their use with the appropriate equipment and armament that they carry, as the maritime security pillar and the defence and deterrence force. Many events took place in the region, which threaten global navigation traffic in the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman, and the Red Sea, which is not only a threat to maritime security but also to the marine environment as well as to the global economy. International investigations have proven Iran's connection to the terrorist act that targeted Saudi and Emirati ships near the coast of the United Arab Emirates.

2. The Capabilities of GCC Countries to Maintain Maritime Security

Military power revitalisation has been a recurring theme in recent years that has influenced naval capabilities in the GCC countries. This means replacing naval capabilities which are at least a quarter-century old with far more modern systems, while still expanding the range of activities that these naval capabilities can be used for. Corvettes and patrol boats have been on the Gulf countries order list as their navies' anti-submarine warfare and blue-water operations ships are becoming priorities. Revitalisation has meant making fleets for the GCC countries that can protect their waters, ports, interests and lands.

Following are details and information on the naval capabilities of the GCC countries, as provided in the previous literature:

- **Saudi Arabia:** The Saudi Naval Forces have two fleets: the Eastern Fleet on the Gulf and the Western Fleet on the Red Sea, and each of them possesses a full military force consisting of combat ship units, administrative and technical support units, the Naval Aviation Group, the Marine Corps and special Naval security units. Saudi Arabia is the only country in the GCC countries that has naval power and bases in both the Gulf region and the Red Sea. The Saudi Navy has recently received massive financial support for development just like other branches of the Saudi Armed Forces. The armament of the Saudi Navy varies, as most of the naval vessels are Western-made (French, British, and American), and currently contain different classes of warships (frigates, patrol boats, mine sweepers, mine hunters, supply ships, small fast boats and support ships), as well as many military naval installations (bases, airports, command centres, naval supply centres, operation and maintenance centres, and advanced health institutions) with approximately 60,000 officers and sailors, including more than 12,000 marines. However, capabilities were improved in the mid-2000s by purchasing three stealth frigates from France, and the Saudis are planning to have submarine technologies. The Saudi Navy conducted joint military exercises with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Pakistan and the GCC countries. They also contracted with the

consulting firm Booz Allen as part of the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreement with the United States to ensure "technical and training assistance".⁽⁴¹⁾

- **Kuwait:** The advancement of Kuwait's navy following the destruction caused by the Iraqi aggression was not as important as the development of other armed forces in the country. Nevertheless, despite the lack of mine warfare vessels, the Kuwaiti Naval Force has an estimated number of 2, 500 individuals, while the naval fleet consists of 10 missile boats, including 8 from the Umm Al-Maradim category, in addition to two missile boats. The Navy owns a number of patrol boats in addition to other logistic marine vessels in addition to the Marines (5, 000 people). Kuwait's Navy is developing relations with the US, Iraq, and NATO forces and has been conducting military exercises with US, British, and French forces – including the 2008 Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 exercise.⁽⁴²⁾
- **Bahrain:** The Navy consists of 11 combat ships, 22 patrol aircraft and more than 700 personnel. The Navy fleet is based on the Port of Salman and the naval aviation wing base that can operate away from ships, and consists of two types BO-105 MBB helicopters. Bahrain's maritime security forces, according to *IHS Jane's* "[have] historically lacked sufficient mine and anti-submarine warfare assets." The forces of Bahrain undergo joint training with the navies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the GCC.⁽⁴³⁾
- **Qatar:** Qatar's navy consists of 1, 800 individuals. Qatar has approximately 35 boats and 13 vehicles equipped with missile capability., *IHS Jane's* notes that "[...] components of the major fleet have been affected in recent years by poor serviceability, raising questions about sustainability." Steps were taken to begin resolving these problems in 2010. Qatar expanded training with the UK and France.⁽⁴⁴⁾
- **United Arab Emirates:** UAE maritime security forces have been attempting to move away from the comparatively centralized role of the smaller GCC navies to an offshore force and it is now a force of about 2, 500 individuals. It maintains 12 well-equipped coastal patrol boats and eight missile boats. Although primarily concerned with coastal and marine defence centres and the construction of a class six blue water cruisers in cooperation with CMN French shipbuilding. The

(41) Biscop, S., & Sassel, J. "Military Factors in the MENA Region: Challenging Trends". *Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture*, 6 November, 2017. (http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_6.pdf).

(42) Gade, Jo G., and Paal Sigurd Hilde. "NATO and the Maritime Domain." In *International Order at Sea*, pp. 115-139. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016.

(43) Katzman, Kenneth. "bahrain: Reform, security, and us Policy." Library of Congress Washington Dc Congressional Research Service, 2013.

(44) Blanchard, Christopher M. "Qatar: Background and US relations." Library of Congress Washington Dc Congressional Research Service, 2010.

UAE maintains a small force the size of a marine battalion called the United Arab Emirates Marine Corps equipped with BMP-3 armoured personnel carriers. *IHS Jane's* notes that the country "[...] needs to improve its anti-submarine warfare, mine counter-measures and anti-swimmer defences [...]". To this end, there is speculation that the country is looking to develop a capability for submarine warfare. The UAE trains with British, French and Dutch armies, and continues to pursue joint military exercises with the navies of the UK and the GCC.⁽⁴⁵⁾

- **Oman:** The Omani naval forces have reached more than 10, 000 individuals, and the Omani authorities provide a costal distance of 3, 165 km. On the length of the Omani coast, the largest, most important base is the Saeed bin Sultan Naval Base. The Omani Royal Navy ships are currently distinguished by their high-efficiency combat equipment in addition to the great capabilities in manoeuvring and armament, due to the fact that they have been provided with the latest equipment, modern electronic fighting means in addition to the latest technology in navigation systems and detection, and driving systems as well as armament systems, whether surface or air. They cooperate with British troops and carry out joint trainings and operations with the UK and GCC countries.⁽⁴⁶⁾

- **Aljazeera Shield (Dera Aljazira) Forces:**⁽⁴⁷⁾

the presence of joint military forces in the GCC is one of the important foundations for the establishment of a joint defence system aimed at providing security to protect the states of the Council, to defend their independence and to protect their capabilities and gains. In 1982, the first important steps for the formation of the joint military forces of the GCC was the decision to establish the Aljazeera Shield Force. It was followed by the issuance of several decisions to develop this force, commensurate with the changes in the security environment, sources and types of challenges, risks, and threats that the GCC countries may face up to the size of a mechanized infantry division with full combat and administrative support. Then it was developed in 2006 in to the Joint Aljazeera Shield Forces, and strengthened by a naval and air forces effort according to operational concepts in order to raise its combat efficiency, so as to ensure the implementation of the tasks of strengthening and supporting the national armed forces of the GCC in full. In 2009, the Joint Aljazeera Shield Forces were strengthened with a rapid intervention force. At the thirty-fourth session of the Supreme Council (Kuwait, December 2013), the Joint Aljazeera Shield Forces command was developed to be the unified ground command of the Unified Military Command of the GCC, called " Aljazeera Shield Forces Command".

(45) Burke, Paul. "The Terrorist Threat to the Maritime Security of the UAE." *ECSSR (Abu Dhabi). Emirates Lecture Series* 85 (2010).

(46) Neubauer, Sigurd. "Maritime security in Oman." In *Maritime Transport Security*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014.

(47) Secretariat General of GCC. "Joint military action". 2020. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/ar-sa/CooperationAndAchievements/Achievements/Pages/main.aspx>

- **Unified Military Command for the GCC States:**⁽⁴⁸⁾

in view of the importance of a unified military leadership for the states of the GCC, concerned with planning and managing joint military operations, and supporting and strengthening the defence capabilities of the states of the Council, to defend their lands, airspace, and waters, and to confront potential threats to the GCC states and their interests, within the framework of the Joint Defence Agreement, the Supreme Council decided at its thirty-fourth session (Kuwait, December 2013) the establishment of the Unified Military Command of the GCC states, according to the detailed study submitted by the Joint Defence Council. And the decisions of the Joint Defence Council related to the establishment and activation of this leadership were approved.

- **The Unified Naval Operations Centre:**⁽⁴⁹⁾

to achieve the main objectives of the GCC in coordination, integration and interdependence among the GCC states in all fields, including cooperation and coordination in the fields of security and naval defence to enhance and develop their military and defence capabilities in a manner that preserves the security and stability and sovereignty of the GCC states, the Supreme Council endorsed at its thirty-fifth session (Doha, December 2014) the decision of the Ministers of Defence of the States of the Council, at the thirteenth session, 11 - 12 November 2014, to establish a Unified Naval Operations Centre, with the centre's headquarters in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The Centre was inaugurated on 4 February 2016, under the patronage of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of Bahrain, with the participation of the Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces in the GCC countries.

After Iran's initiation of the "Tanker Wars" in the Gulf in the 1980s and the creation of Iranian militias to demonstrate its tactical approach to asymmetric warfare, Iran's conventional forces and capabilities are in a position of minimal operability and, in the best of circumstances, it doesn't even match the slightly aging GCC air forces as well as the assets of naval aviation and air force based in the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf. Yet somehow the GCC countries remain committed to spending precious resources in developing the conventional forces, at the cost of naval assets needed to deter Iran's proved maritime prohibition and sea mining technologies.

The previous descriptions of the GCC naval forces indicate along those lines that there is a limitation of missile and naval warfare capabilities. None of the GCC countries possess submarines, although Iran has been having these capabilities for more than 20 years. Just two of the GCC countries, KSA and the UAE, have a mine warfare capability. In the early period of any Iranian sea mining operations

(48) Secretariat General of GCC. "Joint military action". 2020. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/ar-sa/CooperationAndAchievements/Achievements/Pages/main.aspx>

(49) Ibid.

in the Strait of Hormuz, the quite long distance from Saudi ports and US anti-mine ships in Bahrain to the Strait of Hormuz makes international trade dependent on the nearest two mine warfare ships under the Emirates navy.

Considering the nature of Iranian sea mines and the capacity of Tehran to deploy them with submarines quite covertly, naval mine warfare is a crucial part of protecting regional maritime security for the GCC countries. Nonetheless, data suggest that in comparison with the number of vessels operating in the area during the tanker war with Iran, the presence of minesweepers in the Gulf is limited. During that time in the 1980s, 17 minesweepers were involved in mine warfare operations in the Gulf. Nevertheless, the total number of mine warfare vessels in the Gulf today is about ten vessels – four US mine countermeasure vessels in Bahrain, two UK minehunters in Bahrain, three Saudi minehunters in the Eastern Fleet, and two Emirati minehunters.⁽⁵⁰⁾

It is also noted that the GCC naval forces are primarily dedicated to patrolling operations and fighting terrorism, smuggling, and piracy. Some countries in the GCC like Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain lack the capabilities of Blue Water Operations. In addition, these forces seem to have limited capabilities and do not appear to have engaged in joint operations in open waters for tasks such as escorts, tankers, or other types of commercial vessel defence.

3. Military Spending and Capabilities of GCC Countries

Given these threats, the GCC countries have many traditional advantages over Iran's military capabilities, with "new and powerful weapons bought from the United States and Europe".⁽⁵¹⁾ Data estimates that in 2017 Arab GCC states spent \$95-128 billion on military forces. It is reported that Iran has invested between \$15 and \$16 billion. More than 10% of their economies (GDP) were spent on military forces by Iraq, Oman and Saudi Arabia. While the UAE and Qatar have not provided any official data on their military expenditure, they are expected to spend more than 10%. The GCC states overall have spent 11.3 times more than Iran has spent, as Iran's military modernization efforts have been constraining following years of sanctions imposed.⁽⁵²⁾

In addition to have more major weapons in most fields of conventional arms, the GCC weapons systems are more advanced and effective than Iran's systems with a near analysis of Iran's attempts to

(50) Cordesman, Anthony H., and Alexander Wilner. *The gulf military balance in 2012*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012.

(51) Cordesman, Anthony H., and Martin Kleiber. *Iran's military forces and warfighting capabilities: the threat in the Northern Gulf*. CSIS, 2007.

(52) Cooper, Andrew Scott. *The oil kings: how the US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia changed the balance of power in the Middle East*. Simon and Schuster, 2012.

modernize the Iranian ground, air and sea-based force, the key Iranian weapons systems are outdated, obsolete, or rather of low quality.

The GCC has the advantages of purchasing high-tech military systems from its allies, especially the United States, which are far more modern than Iranian military systems. In 2013, UAE bought two Terminal High Altitude Defence (THAAD) systems and Patriot batteries. Saudi Arabia has an extraordinarily good standing, the oldest and largest missile defence capacity. Saudi has various weapons, including Hawk Surface-to-Air (MIM 23B I-Hawk and MIM J / K Hawk) rockets and Patriot batteries, including Pac-2andPac-3Missile systems. Saudi and the UAE possess the core of GCC military capabilities and defence capabilities, including weapons such as missile defence. The next figure shows the military Spending of GCC Countries and Iran.

Country	Military Spending (\$bn)
Saudi Arabia	81.9
Iran	15.9
UAE	14.4
Oman	9.88
Qatar	5.09
Kuwait	4.43
Bahrain	1.53

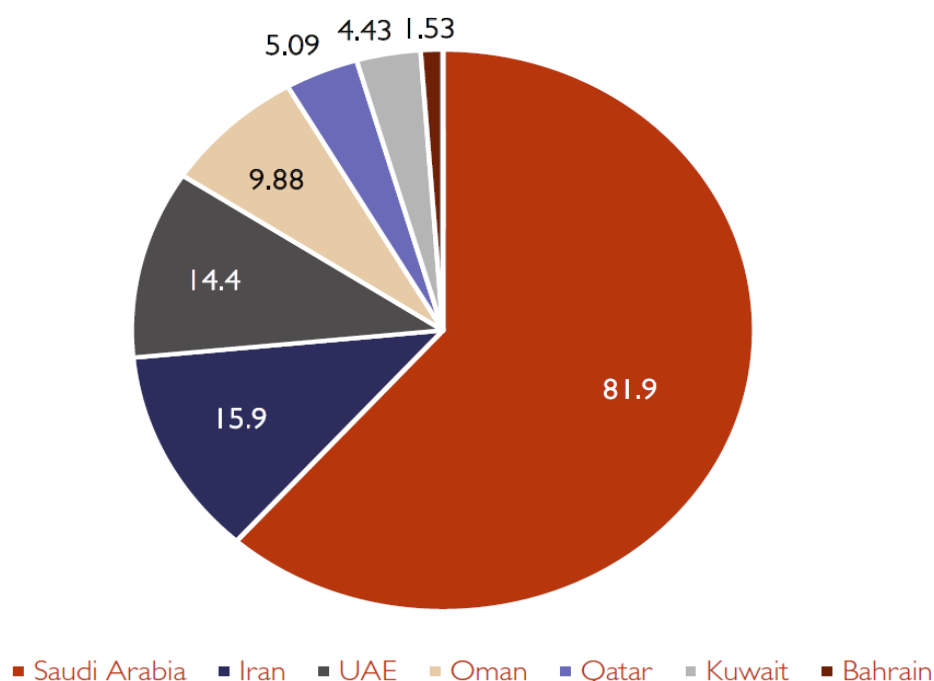


Figure (1): Military Spending of GCC and Iran in (\$bn)

Source: Military Balance 2016 (Data for Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia from 2015; data for Iran, Qatar, and U.A.E. from (2014).

GCC states that invest far more in their military capabilities, and that have conventional military forces with much more advanced and capable military equipment, have not yet been willing, because of the political differences between the GCC countries and some that with friendlier relations with Iran, such as Qatar and Oman, to counter Iran's Threats effectively. Iran has consistently tried to create chaos in the GCC, as demonstrated in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and to break the solidarity of the GCC Countries, as shown by opposition to the Saudi demand for greater regional integration by Oman, Kuwait and Qatar.

CONCLUSION

The GCC states have been dependent, in their view, on their relationship with Iran according to the view of seeking balance in power. They were working to raise their military, political, economic and cultural capabilities in the face of the power of Iran, military, political, economic and cultural; but without this leading to a result that deters the Iranian threats to the Gulf region and its incursions into GCC countries.

The raising GCC countries strength in various of these areas did not guarantee security for them, but we found that countries like Iran penetrate into Arab affairs to spread the ideas of its project, until it reached the state of incursion into striking the fabric of national unity within the GCC states, and that the situation also reaches support for its influence and presence In the countries surrounding the GCC states such as Iraq and Yemen. The balance of power did not achieve the purpose required of it to curb the policies of other countries seeking to harm the GCC states. So it was necessary to switch from the idea of relying on the strategy of seeking balance in power to a strategy of achieving balance in the threat, that is, using the same language that the opponent uses.

The joint Gulf action, especially that which came as a result of the strong strategic cooperation that exists between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in facing the serious Iranian threats to the security of the Gulf region was the essence of the idea of achieving a balance in the threat. Bahrain almost drifted towards the Persian, Iranian, and sectarian project had it not been for the strength of the Gulf response, which spread its teeth by facing the threat of threat.

States are associating their defence with perceived threats, according to Stephan Walt, Developed in his 1990 book *The Origins of Alliances*, and trying to counter that through international relations. There are four elements which identify perceived threat according to Walt. The four threat elements are: (a) combined strength, (b) geographic proximity, (c) offensive ability, and (d) offensive intent.

According to the analysis of the balance of threat criteria, to GCC countries backed by the U.S, Iran is the region's primary source of threat to regional instability, and any regional balance strategy should focus on preventing the risks generated by Iranian actions.

The current study sought to answer the following main question: To what extent are the Gulf Cooperation Council states responding to Iranian threats to maintain their common security in the Gulf

maritime domain? which is related with the hypothesis of the study: Iran poses threats to Gulf security, which The Gulf Cooperation Council states are pushing for more cooperation and firmly responding to these threats to maintain their common security in the Gulf maritime domain. It was clear to us through what was reviewed in the previous chapters and in light of the theory of the balance of threat that Iran, with its capabilities and aspirations, poses a real threat to the GCC states, especially with regard to maritime security, But on the other hand, we find that the efforts made by the Gulf countries are still relatively limited in relation to cooperation in the maritime domain to confront Iranian threats, which the Gulf states must exert more joint efforts to achieve their common maritime security, that could be attributed in the first place to the different political positions among the GCC states towards Iran, so that we can divide the Gulf House into two groups in their position to Iran, the hawks; the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, they are characterized by strict positions towards Iranian policies, and we find Saudi Arabia is often leading this bloc to address the absurd Iranian policies in the region. While on the other side, we find the other group the doves; the Oman, Qatar and Kuwait, who maintained friendly relations with Iran and known for its flexibility towards Iranian policies. Qatar, for example, increased its relations at all levels to Iran after the Gulf dispute in 2017 and the consequent isolation of Qatar by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Bahrain because of its support for terrorist groups, which pushed Qatar away to more rapprochement with Iran. This aspect may require more attention from researchers to shed light on the extent of the Qatari-Iranian rapprochement after the Gulf crisis in 2017 and how did this affect the GCC states system?

In conclusion, the Gulf system has witnessed several forms of power balance, as a regional security arrangement under the primary auspices of the United States, along with its experience that is still ongoing so far, regarding the mutual defence agreement at the level of the GCC states. As the issue of Gulf security is the main driver for advocacy for the GCC states, it is the issue that is supposed to take the first priority in the work of the Council. The changes taking place in the Gulf region indicate that there are some security developments that it imposes on the GCC countries to move in improve their common Gulf defence strategy that enables it to send clear messages that the GCC countries are united against threats to their security and stability.

The Gulf security remains a crucial concern for the GCC states to ensure the free flow of their oil abroad. Despite strides toward economic diversification, these countries still rely heavily on their energy reserves and exports.

The GCC maritime security in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz represents one of the most essential dimensions in the equation of its regional security within its overall framework, or to transfer its more central context. At the same time, this strait has been linked to international security as the most important water artery for oil energy in the world.

The GCC navies provide fewer support and attention than their counterparts in the air and the ground. Many were developed to serve for deterring or slowing an Iranian assault in defensive coastal operations. Despite Iran's anti-ship mining history, there remains a lack of platforms for mine warfare in the Gulf. The United States and its Arab allies controlled 17 minesweepers in the area at the height of the "Tanker War" in the 1980's. Only ten are still operating today. The GCC states still run only 12 frigates. Shallow-water vessels such as missile boats and patrol boats offer a significant advantage for the user in the crowded and shallow waters of the Gulf. Among these ships, Iran holds a substantial advantage, running far more submarines, missile boats, and patrol vessels than its GCC neighbours.

Recent agreements by GCC states are seeking to resolve this shortage. To maintain maritime security in the region, the Saudi navy formed joint ventures with French and Spanish companies. It is also buying about 50 new fast-patrol boats from Germany. Saudi Arabia is paying \$11.2 billion to Lockheed Martin to build four modified versions of the US Littoral Combat Ship. The UAE have signed a deal with a French shipbuilder for up to four new corvettes, worth \$850 million. These agreements are intended to ensure maritime security in the Gulf area.

GCC states is progressing in developing their naval capabilities, including corvettes, frigates, and missile ships, as well as missile defense capabilities. With the Naval Modernization Programs, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman are on the right track but have a long way to go before they can build a sufficient fleets, and Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar need to do more. The combined navy presence will be sufficient to prevent Iran from arresting or attacking merchant ships in the Strait of Hormuz.

A lack of deterrence had led Iran to conclude – precisely – that it could act with relative impunity during 2019, for example the September 2019 strike at Abqaiq on Saudi oil facilities, the brazen capture of an unescorted British tanker and the downing of a US drone's downing months before. However, on January 3, Killing Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani restored deterrence by demonstrating to Iran that the US can and should use force in the face of Iranian aggression. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries will now follow the leadership from Washington to restore deterrence in the face of Tehran's desperate regime. But the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council must develop more in their military and naval capabilities to achieve this goal in the near future.

The hands-off approach to Iranian aggression at the Gulf by the US administration will serve as a wake-up call for GCC countries. While Washington has assumed the responsibility of protecting the Gulf waterways for decades, Carter Doctrine obituaries indicate that the Trump administration is not inclined to permanently commit US ships there. Moreover, in response to China, the Indo-Pacific has become the most important theatre for the US military – and particularly the navy.

All this means that the role of maintaining the maritime security in the Gulf region must fall primarily to the GCC states themselves. Wedded to US security guarantees, the GCC states have let their

fleets atrophy to the point where only a handful of aging ships can be picked up by the Saudi navy – arguably the best in the region. Confronted with Iran's asymmetric warfare

Eventually, creating a balance of interests between regional and transregional players would better help to offer the GCC Gulf sustainable peace and stability. Rather of concentrating on discrepancies, a GCC security agreement be focused mainly on a new interpretation of the essence of the threat, a clear understanding of the priorities of all players concerned, and defining shared security issues and interests. The need for collaboration between the GCC countries is not only necessary but unavoidable in the longer term. With the continuous geopolitical changes, no regional security agreements can succeed without the joint cooperation of the GCC countries.