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978-0-521-19023-7 - The International Relations of the Persian Gulf

F. Gregory Gause

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1 The Persian Gulf as a security region

This book will tell the story of the international politics of the Persian Gulf region, the site of three large-scale international wars since 1980: the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88, the Gulf War of 1990–91 and the Iraq War, which began with the American invasion of 2003 and continues to today. The year 1971 is the starting point for the study because it marks an important turning point in the region’s history. Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman become independent in that year, ending decades as British protectorates. Kuwait, the other small monarchical state in the area, gained its independence from London in 1961. With the end of formal British protection of these smaller states, the larger regional powers – Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia – could contest for regional influence in a much less constrained environment. With the oil revolution of the early 1970s underway, these three states had much greater resources to commit to their contest for influence. The narrative ends in 2008, but not because the story is over.

A number of themes will tie together this narrative of Gulf international politics. The wars themselves are central to the story, to be sure. I will try to convince you that Saddam Hussein’s war decisions in 1980 and 1990 (and even his behavior in the lead-up to the 2003 war) and the alliance decisions of regional powers are best explained by leaders’ concerns about their own hold on power domestically, and how regional events and regional rivals could affect their own security at home. They view threats primarily through the lens of regime security rather than more conventional balance of power considerations, though the latter are certainly not absent from their calculations. Threats to regime security in the Gulf region are particularly salient to rulers because of the power and importance of transnational identities in the region – ethnic identities in their Arab and Kurdish manifestations, Muslim identity, sectarian Sunni and Shi’i identities. Because ambitious rulers can use these identity issues to mobilize support across state borders, Gulf rulers have to be worried not just about conventional power threats, but also about ideological threats which their neighbors can use to stir up regime challenges from within their own polities.

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The arc of American involvement in the region is another theme that will knit together the narrative. When Britain gave up its historic role as protector of the small Gulf states, the United States was mired in Vietnam and had no stomach for taking on new international security obligations. But the importance of the region's oil resources, the repercussions of regional events such as the Iranian Revolution, growing American ambitions in the post-Cold War world and the 9/11 attacks led to progressively costly and sustained American military involvement in the region, culminating in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. I devote a whole chapter at the end of the book to examining the American decision to invade Iraq in 2003, which I see as a major departure from the past pattern of American policy in the Gulf. Before the 2003 war, American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf was relatively simple to understand. Washington wanted to maintain itself as the dominant regional power, because of the oil resources there. Because the United States was the dominant force in the area, "stability" was Washington's Gulf mantra. Irruptions in the status quo, such as the Iranian Revolution and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, challenged American dominance and, where possible, had to be reversed. But 2003 was something different. I will make the argument that the 9/11 attacks changed the perceptions of the major decision-makers in the George W. Bush administration about American interests in the region, devaluing stability as a predominant American concern and substituting for it an ambitious effort to remake both the international and the domestic politics of the region. I will argue that other factors, including oil, were less important to this decision than many assume.

A third theme that will tie together the narrative is oil itself. The changes in the world oil market since the early 1970s are both causes and effects of regional international political outcomes. Oil has been a uniting factor among regional states during certain periods and an object of regional contestation in other periods. The narrative will link developments in the world oil market and regional states' oil policies to the regional security issues on their agenda and examine American actions in the region in light of American policy on oil issues.

No book can do everything, and I alert the reader to gaps in this account. I do not speak Persian, and thus was not able to delve into the indigenous literature on Iranian foreign policy. I use a number of very good English-language studies of Iranian decision-making as the basis for my discussion of Iranian policy. However, I was not able to do in-depth analysis of important Iranian war decisions, such as the 1982 decision to continue fighting into Iraqi territory after Iraqi troops had been expelled from Iran or the 1988 decision to accept a cease-fire in the Iran–Iraq War.

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The important Iranian decisions to remain neutral in the two Iraqi–American wars also do not get the attention they deserve. I look forward to scholars with the necessary language skills enlightening me and other English-language readers about these episodes.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I will make the case that the events under study are best understood by viewing the Persian Gulf as a distinct regional security complex. I will examine the rather meager literature on the international politics of the Gulf. I will frame the questions of war and alliance decision-making in their larger theoretical contexts. Those who are not particularly interested in these theoretical issues can skip the following sections and go right to the beginning of the narrative of Gulf international politics in Chapter 2.

The Persian Gulf as a regional security complex

My contention is that the best way to understand the security outcomes in the Persian Gulf – the wars that occur there, the alliances that are formed, even, to some extent, the problems of consolidating centralized states – is to view the area as a regional security complex. This approach stands in contrast to two alternative starting points of inquiry. The first starts with the foreign policies of specific states, and thus would seek to understand the security dynamics of the Gulf by looking at Saudi foreign policy, Iranian foreign policy and so on. The second starts with the global level, looking at how a specific region fits into the global security dynamic. Both of these alternative approaches have important gaps which prevent them from helping us understand the totality of the security picture in the Gulf. A focus on regional state foreign policies loses the dynamic of their interaction and takes us away from larger questions about why the region is so conflict-prone. Works limited to Iranian foreign policy, for example, cannot help us appreciate the regional impact of the Iranian Revolution. Thus, Iraq's attack on Iran comes from out of the blue, or out of the frame, in such analyses. The global approach is certainly necessary for understanding why the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. It does not explain how and why regional parties over time invited the United States to play a much greater role in regional security issues, allowing Washington to build the military infrastructure in the Gulf that made the Iraq War possible.

The concept of regional security complexes was first introduced by Barry Buzan, though he builds on the insights of earlier scholars who wrote about international systems. Buzan defines regional systems by the mutuality of threat/fear felt among the members toward each other. He urges analysts to focus on the degree to which certain geographically

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grouped states spend most of their time and effort worrying about each other, and not other states.¹ Those states with intense security interdependence over time qualify as regional security complexes.² In simple terms, regional systems should include states whose primary security focus is one another, manifested over time in the wars they fight and the time and resources they devote to dealing with one another. Note that this conception of regional system does not privilege positive interactions such as efforts at regional integration. Systems are defined by the intensity and durability of their security interactions, whether positive or negative.

If we accept this approach to defining regional security complexes, does the Persian Gulf area qualify? To my mind, without a doubt. The area has seen three major wars since 1980. Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were either direct combatants or played important roles in all of them. Even when they were not active combatants, their alliance choices in these wars were centrally important to how those conflicts turned out. The Persian Gulf system certainly includes these four states. It also includes the other Gulf monarchies, whose security concerns (expressed in the time and resources devoted to their relations with the members of the system) are also primarily Gulf-focused. The states that border the Persian Gulf are certainly members of the system.

Does it make analytical sense to include other states in the Gulf regional security complex? We would be hard-pressed to say that most of Turkey's foreign policy energies, even its security focus, is on the Gulf states. Turkey is important to understanding the Gulf complex, but not a member. Likewise with Syria and Jordan. They both border Iraq; Jordan also borders Saudi Arabia. But their security attentions are focused as much to their west as to their east. Yemen's security policy is intensely focused on Saudi Arabia, but only marginally on issues arising from the Persian Gulf. While all these countries will play a role in the narrative chapters to follow, it is Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf monarchies that form the Persian Gulf regional security complex, because they focus intensely on each other and devote the bulk of their security resources to relations with each other, and have done so for decades.

Why hive the Gulf off from the larger Middle East as a separate security complex? The vast majority of authors who have studied security issues in

¹ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), Chapter 5.

² Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 3, particularly pp. 45–49. David Lake makes a similar argument in “Regional Security Complexes: A Systems Approach,” in David A. Lake and Patrick Morgan (eds.), *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997), pp. 48–49.

the region do not do so.³ Very few scholars have focused exclusively on the Gulf as a regional security complex. I made an effort to do so in the early 1990s, the beginning of my interest in this topic.⁴ Two Arab authors, Abd al-Khaleq Abdulla and Muhammad al-Sa'id Idris, used the framework of a Gulf regional security system in their interesting and important books published in the late 1990s.⁵ More recently, in the wake of the Iraq War, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam presented a constructivist account of Gulf regional conflicts.⁶ I will discuss insights from all three of these works below. But here the point is that very few scholars have looked at the Persian Gulf as its own regional unit.

The Gulf states are certainly part of a larger Middle Eastern system. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq have all committed resources in a sustained way, over time, to issues in the Eastern Mediterranean – the Arab–Israeli conflict and Lebanon. Transnational identities of Arabism and Islam connect the Gulf to the Levant. There are important analytical questions about the international politics of the Middle East that can be answered only by taking this larger regional perspective. However, simply folding the Gulf states into the larger Middle East security complex runs the analytical risk of having Arab–Israeli questions drive the analysis of regional international politics. It would be a profound analytical error to see the conflicts in the Gulf as simply extensions of a presumed-dominant regional conflict pattern defined by Arab–Israeli issues. The international politics of the Persian Gulf region have a dynamic quite separate from that of the Arab–Israeli region, even though events in one area certainly affect the other. To understand that dynamic, we need to concentrate on events and processes in the Gulf itself.

One more definitional question about membership in the Persian Gulf regional security complex confronts us: is the United States a member of

³ The most recent examples of such an approach are: Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and Fred H. Lawson, *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). This is also the approach of Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, Chapter 7, though they identify the Gulf as a “sub-complex” of the larger Middle East complex.

⁴ F. Gregory Gause, III, “Gulf Regional Politics: Revolution, War and Rivalry,” in W. Howard Wriggins (ed.), *Dynamics of Regional Politics: Four Systems on the Indian Ocean Rim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁵ Abd al-Khaleq Abdulla, *Al-nizam al-‘iqlimi al-khaliji* [The Gulf Regional System] (Beirut: Al-Mu’assasa al-Jami’iya lil-Dirasat wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’, 1998); Muhammad al-Sa'id Idris, *Al-nizam al-‘iqlimi lil-khalij al-‘arabi* [The Regional System of the Arab Gulf] (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-‘Arabiya, 2000).

⁶ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006).

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the system? Here the theorists of regional security differ.⁷ I think that it would be foolish to think about the dynamics of the Persian Gulf regional security complex without including the United States as a member. However, the intensity of its involvement has changed over time. The United States was less involved in Gulf security issues in the 1970s than it was in the 1980s, less involved in the 1980s than in the 1990s, less involved in the 1990s than in the 2000s. I can also imagine, in the wake of its Iraq debacle, that the United States might play a much less direct role in Gulf security dynamics in the future. I emphasize that there are security dynamics independent of American involvement in the region: the triangular contest for influence among Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia which helps explain the Iran–Iraq War and Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait; the transnational identity factors which draw ambitious leaders into cross-border involvements and exacerbate the security dilemma; the sometimes cooperative, sometimes conflictual dynamics generated by the fact that the Gulf states are major oil producers. But it is hard to argue with the fact that the United States determined the outcome of one Gulf war in 1991 and profoundly changed the distribution of regional power in 2003 by destroying what had been an important pole of regional power. The United States is directly involved in the region, but it does not completely control events in the Gulf.

The structure of the Gulf security complex

At the most basic level, the structure of any international system is defined by the distribution of power within it. The Persian Gulf is a tripolar regional system. Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are the major players. Each has been able to extend its influence over other members of the system at various times; none is so powerful as to be able to control the politics and policies of the others. The relations of power within this three-cornered regional game have varied over time. Iran under the shah clearly was the most powerful regional actor and usually got its way in the pre-Revolution period. The oil revolution of 1973–74 strengthened all three players, but improved the position of Saudi Arabia, the biggest oil producer of the three, the most relatively. The chaos of the Iranian Revolution seemed to catapult Iraq to the forefront of the regional power rankings. Then the Iran–Iraq War and the Gulf War reduced Iraqi power relative to that of its neighbors. But through these changes the tripolar structure of the region endured.

⁷ For opposing positions, see Patrick Morgan, “Regional Security Complexes and Regional Orders,” in Lake and Morgan (eds.), *Regional Orders*, pp. 28–33; and Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, Chapter 3, particularly pp. 48–49, 63–64, 80–81, and Chapter 14, particularly pp. 450–51.

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Structures, however, are not immutable. The American invasion in 2003 basically destroyed Iraq as a pole of power in the Gulf for the foreseeable future. Iraq since the invasion has been a playing field, not a player, in regional politics. Iran and Saudi Arabia now contest for influence both within Iraq, in the Gulf more generally and in the Middle East as a whole.

Up to 2003, regional tripolarity defined the structure of the Persian Gulf security complex. The competition among Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia for regional dominance set the Gulf's security agenda. There was a second triangular competition in the region as well, with the smaller Gulf monarchies maneuvering between Saudi Arabia – their close neighbor, self-proclaimed protector and, at times, overbearing patron – and either Iraq or Iran. The Saudis were able to consolidate their leading position in the other monarchies through the Gulf Cooperation Council, founded in 1981 in reaction to the Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War. However, the smaller Gulf states have now found a new patron and protector, the United States, which allows them (if they want it) a bit of room to maneuver within the Saudi orbit.

The Persian Gulf regional security complex has its own structure, but it is also embedded in an international system. For most of the period of this study, global politics were bipolar, defined by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Each superpower played a role in the region, supporting local allies and checking each other's regional ambitions. There has been much less theorizing about global unipolarity and its effects on regional conflicts, both because the situation is still relatively new (existing only since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991) and because there are so few similar historical periods.⁸ One thing is certain: even in unipolarity, the United States found no reason to disengage from the Persian Gulf. The sensible assumption that unipolarity would remove a check on great power interventionism in important regions was borne out in the Gulf. From 1990, the American role in the Gulf became progressively more militarized and more direct, culminating in the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Idris explicitly links the end of global bipolarity to the change in the Gulf, from local actors driving the security agenda to US control becoming the dominant security factor.⁹

While agreeing that global unipolarity removed an important constraint on American military involvement in the Persian Gulf, I dispute the

⁸ On the general issue of how regional and global structures interact, see two works by Benjamin Miller: *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); and *States, Nations and the Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ Idris, *Al-nizam al-'iqlimi lil-khalij al-'arabi*, pp. 15, 576.

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contention that global unipolarity led to American “control” of the Gulf region. Even with its heavy military involvement, the United States has not been able to dictate completely the politics of the region, either before 2003 or after. Iran continues to defy the American order and challenge American influence in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. Iraqi parties themselves have challenged the US effort to remake their domestic politics. Even Saudi Arabia, while generally following the American policy line, has deviated on important tactical questions regarding policy toward Iraq, the Arab–Israeli peace process and oil production. The hegemon cannot always get its way.

Transnational identities and foreign policy decisions

Structure, at the regional and the global level, constrains the choices of the players in the Gulf game but does not dictate specific policy choices. The Gulf regional structure was tripolar both before and after the Iranian Revolution, but the behavior of all the regional states changed dramatically with that domestic Iranian political event. There was a regional war during the period of global bipolarity (Iran–Iraq War), a regional war as bipolarity was transitioning to unipolarity (Gulf War) and a regional war under unipolarity (Iraq War). The United States was the sole global power during both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, but American policy in the Gulf was significantly different under those two presidents. Unipolarity was the permissive condition for the United States to go to war in Iraq in 2003, but unipolarity did not cause that war. Structure alone cannot answer the questions of why states in the Gulf (or great powers involved in the Gulf) go to war and why they choose the allies they do.

So what drives foreign policy behavior in the Gulf? At first glance, this seems to be a simple story of power grabs, easily explained by classic “balance of power” (what international relations theorists call Realist) dynamics. Many Realists see shifts in power and disparities in power as the driving forces of conflict, and the Gulf during the period under study saw both important power shifts and enduring power imbalances. Oil exacerbates these conflicts in three ways that Realists would have no trouble understanding. First, because it is a strategic commodity, it draws outside powers into the region. Second, because ownership of oil comes with control of the territory that sits over the oil, the possession of territory in the Gulf is that much more important and valuable for a state.¹⁰ So border disputes, always a potential cause of conflict, become

¹⁰ Michael L. Ross, “Blood Barrels: Why Oil Wealth Fuels Conflict,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (May/June 2008), pp. 2–9.

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even more salient when the territory in dispute has oil under it. A cursory look at the wars in the Gulf could lead one to see each as a fight for regional dominance and the expansion of oil control: Iraq attacking a weakened Iran in 1980, invading the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan; Iraq attacking small but oil-rich Kuwait in 1990; and the United States attacking oil-rich Iraq in 2003. Third, oil has given the regional powers the wherewithal to build large militaries and arm them with modern weapons. While states can go to war with small, ill-armed militaries, the chances of success would seem to increase as a state's military resources grow. The major wars in the Gulf in the modern period have all occurred since the oil price revolution of the early 1970s.¹¹

While this simple story is appealingly parsimonious, and the factors it highlights are certainly part of the dynamics of Persian Gulf security, in the end it is not a satisfactory framework for understanding the region. These factors are constants; they cannot explain why specific wars occurred when they did nor how important political events such as the Iranian Revolution and the 9/11 attacks led to changes in regional dynamics. The argument will be made in the chapters that follow that oil was not the primary driver of any of the Gulf wars. Border disputes might have been the pretext of the Iran–Iraq and Iraq–Kuwait conflicts, but they were not the cause. I will argue throughout the book that regional states acted more against perceived threats to their own domestic stability emanating from abroad than to counter unfavorable changes in the distribution of power or to take advantage of favorable power imbalances. They chose their allies based not on classic balance of power considerations, balancing against the strongest regional state, but on how their own domestic regime security would be affected by the outcome of regional conflicts. The most important and distinctive factor in the Gulf regional security complex is not power imbalances but the salience of transnational identities.

The Persian Gulf region is characterized by a number of important transnational identities – Arab, Kurdish, Muslim, Shi'i, Sunni, tribal. Arab identities cross every border in the Gulf region, including the Iraq–Iran border, with the large Arab minority community in Khuzestan province (southwestern Iran). The Kurdish identity spans the Turkish–Iraqi–Iranian borders. Iran, Iraq and Bahrain are majority Shi'i countries; there are important Shi'i minorities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The larger Muslim identity transcends all the

¹¹ For Abd al-Khaleq Abdulla, Gulf regional politics are an exclusively Realist story. He identifies four reasons for the high level of regional conflicts: regional power imbalances, the Saudi–Iraqi–Iranian rivalry for regional dominance, border disputes and great power intervention: Abdulla, *Al-nizam al-'iqlimi al-khaliji*, pp. 128–32.

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region's borders. Important tribes cross the borders of the Arab states. This fact does not discount the importance of state identities. Iran has a millennial history as a political unit and a strong sense of nationalism among its population. The Arab monarchies of the Gulf are newer creations, but have also developed some degree of citizen loyalty and identification. Iraq suffers from serious domestic cleavages, exacerbated by Saddam Hussein's rule and by the American occupation since 2003, but there remains among many Arab Iraqis an identification with their state. But these cross-border identities in the Gulf are real, presenting both opportunities and challenges to Gulf leaders.

These identities affect regional international politics in two important ways. First, they offer ambitious leaders access to the domestic politics of their neighbors, using ties with groups across borders as levers of influence on other governments.¹² Transnational identities also increase the likelihood of war, because leaders can come to believe that important constituencies in target states will rally to support the invading army. The shah of Iran supported Kurdish opponents of the Iraqi regime in the 1960s and early 1970s, and since that time governments in both Baghdad and Tehran have cultivated ties with the Kurdish opponents of the other. Saddam Hussein thought his attack on southwestern Iran in 1980 would be facilitated by the Arab population there; Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini likewise thought that Iraqi Shi'a, though Arab, would rally to his side when Iranian forces carried the offensive into Iraq in 1982. Saddam tried to exploit both Arab nationalist and Islamist ideological tropes to gain regional support for his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Even where such identities have not contributed to war, they can cause tensions between the countries encouraging such transnational identification and the countries targeted for such efforts. Revolutionary Iran has cultivated ties with Islamist groups across the Arab world, mostly Shi'i but some Sunni. Ayatollah Khomeini portrayed his revolution as a model for the entire Muslim world, not only Shi'i Muslims. Saudi Arabia has encouraged the spread of its own brand of Wahhabi Sunni Islam across the Sunni Muslim world for decades.

Second, these transnational identities are seen as threats by leaders to their own regimes' stability. I will make the case that Saddam Hussein's decisions to go to war in both 1980 and 1990 were strongly affected by his perception that regional and international (in the case of 1990) powers were exploiting the pluralism of Iraqi society to try to weaken his regime's

¹² For an excellent account of how one of these transnational networks works on the ground, see Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst and Company, 2008).