

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Impact of Geopolitical Determinants on Iranian-Gulf Relations: 2011 - 2018

Mohammad Ali Khalaf AlBadareen

Department of Political Science, the University of Jordan, Jordan

### **Abstract:**

*This study analyzes the influence of geopolitical determinants on Iranian-Gulf relations. This relation has begun before 1980, but it was clearly affected by Arab Spring, more specifically, after 2011. Therefore, the current study investigates how the geopolitical factors could affect the Iranian-Gulf relations. In other words, it aims to answer the questions highlighted by the researcher. In addition, it aims to see the factors that were studied in this relation, so the literature was critically reviewed in order to achieve this goal. The results show that the relations between Gulf States and Iran are not same some countries have changed its relations with Iran from being negative relations to have warm and cooperative relation. In addition, this study confirms that the two main players in such relation is Saudi Arabia and Iran due to various reasons not only one specific reason, but affected by the two countries leaderships. This study recommends more studies in order to go deeply into these relations.*

**Keywords:** Iranian-gulf relation, geopolitical, Iran, Gulf States

### 1. Introduction

Point of fact, the spatial dimension of the geopolitical side determines the international relations to a large extent, and affects the forms of regional and international interaction in which it could create a conflict or a cooperative or a combination of countries' relations due to different fields. According to Halliday (1996) "the geopolitics of the contemporary Gulf are dominated by a triangular conflict between the three most powerful states of the region - Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia" (p.1). This kind of conflict dominated the entire region for the past quarter of a century, and showed that there no abating sign, the conflict has no stable resolution (Halliday, 1996). In this regard, it is significant to understand the geopolitical forces as they play an effective role on the relation between countries (Dempsey, Qureshi, Ondoma, and Dempsey, 2017; Guyot, 2011). They explain these geopolitical forces have always affected war, political stability, economy, and geography.

In this vein, Halliday (1996) states that even though a conflict is found in the relationship around the Gulf, there are no insuperable international obstacles at first sight to create peace among these three powerful states. In fact, plenty of mechanisms could be found that to resolve such territorial, political, and issues that could divide them. One of the important factors that could affect the relationship between Iran and Gulf countries since the Gulf region is seen to have 65% proven reserves of crude oil and 33% of the natural-gas reserves of the world (Okruhlik, 2003). The main two powers in this relationship between Iran and Gulf countries are presented by Iran and Saudi Arabia.

This claim is proven by Pradhan (2018) who states that the Iran and Saudi Arabia relationship has a significant factor in the Persian Gulf region's stability as same as among the Middle East. Many issues are existed in which they remain the contention' bone between these two key regional players. The relations of Saudi-Iranian have been launched since the Islamic revolution's time, in 1979, in Iran. In addition, the interests of Iran, in the Arab Spring, are still continued to grow since the spreading of protests among Arab countries. For example, in Bahrain, the protests have become a conflict's flashpoint between both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Another example is the Syria's demography and population nature are a conflict propellant because the civil war, in Syria, has taken sectarian dimensions.

The instability in Yemen is considered an important concern for Saudi Arabia due to its long border with it. This current paper attempts to investigate the determinants and their dimensions of the Iranian role in light of the Iranian decision makers' views in all their levels, namely local, regional and international levels and with an interest in explaining the motives and transformations of such moves. It is noticeable that Iran tries to strike a balance between its geopolitical position, its Islamic past and its revolutionary present. Besides, it aims to see how to formulate this role and achieve its position in the regional and international format, which probably creates a situation of competition and conflict with some Gulf countries, but compatible with other countries. This could be seen as creating problems among Gulf countries and a challenge to the unity of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and therefore. This study adopts the decision-making approach and functional approach within the framework of geopolitics to explore the dimensions of Iranian foreign policy towards the Gulf Cooperation Council.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Iran is seen to be an effective regional power and it has its effective existence in the region. It also has built bases in different regions in order to draw its foreign policy paths. This kind of existence to achieve its objectives and national interests according to its vision towards the Gulf region, and hence, this study formulates the central main question of the research problem as follows:

- What is the impact of the geopolitical determinants on Iranian-Gulf relations during the study period 2011-2018?

The following sub-questions arise from this central main question as follows:

- What is the impact of the leadership in both sides on the reformulation of Iranian-Gulf relations?
- What is the impact of the distribution of roles imposed by the nature of the international system on the relations between the two sides?
- What is the impact of the strategic dimension of Iran with the regional system, especially its near neighborhood with the accompanying issues (waterways, land, borders, minorities and community movements in affecting positively or negatively such relations)?
- To what extent does the economic dimension affect these relations?

## 3. Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the leadership impact of Iran and the Gulf states in shaping the strategic role of their countries, and drawing the paths of the relationship between these two sides.
- To explore the foreign policy determinants of these two parties those, highlight the points of convergence and separation.
- To identify the conditions, tools and methods that can drive these relationships into more collaborative interaction.

## 4. Significance of the Study

Studying the issue of Iranian-Gulf relations at this stage and time has a special importance and it is resulted by many noticeable reasons. This research is also considered important on the theoretical and practical due to the key changes in the entire region that will undoubtedly affect the future stage. Therefore, this study highlights its importance in two ways:

### 4.1. Theoretical Significance

- In fact, the roots of the Iranian-Gulf relationship are deep-rooted and are due to the outcome of the interaction of geographical, religious, human and economic factors.
- The economic interaction gives the above factors a special and distinct form.
- Since the Iranian relationship is manifested through direct links between the two sides at the bilateral level (with each Gulf state) and at the Gulf Cooperation Council level as well as with other interactions that are related to the international system. Thus, the present study did not go into the depth historical relationship.

### 4.2. Practical Significance

This study practically contributes as it highlights essential points in which they encourage Iranian and Gulf policymakers to formulate their policies in a way that takes into account the interests of both sides and find solutions to the outstanding issues (Arab islands, minorities, water, waterways, and nuclear file), and this helps the two sides to gravitate in a close circle to obtain an effective role that encourages the other party to put the highest interests in the right track.

## 5. Research Hypotheses

Based on the research problem and questions, this study hypothesizes the main research hypothesis:

- There is a positive relationship between the geographical factor, the regional situation and the Iranian-Gulf relations

The following sub-hypotheses arise from this central main hypothesis as follows:

- There is a positive relationship due to the change in Arab political leaderships and the popular Arab protest movement and the Iranian foreign policy towards the Arab region, especially, the Arab Gulf.
- There is a significant correlation between the regional and international variables experienced by the region in strengthening the Iranian role at the expense of the Arab regional system.
- The more clashing of the Iranian-Israeli relations, the greater the impact of Iran's regional situation

## 6. Limitation of the Study

It was considered that the period of research should be between 2011 and 2018. The choice of 2011 as the beginning of the research period is because this year witnessed the beginning of the Arab popular protests. In addition, this year "2011" is chosen because of the changes in the structure of a number of countries in the region and the reformulation of foreign policy and the patterns of this policy appear in accordance with the nature of this stage. Besides,

choosing 2018 as it is the end of the period of research, because this year is the date at which it can be stopped to obtain data, information, and literature related to this topic. In addition, this study aims to use the geopolitical as independent variable and the Iranian-Gulf relations as the dependent variable.

## 7. Literature Studies

This section aims at situating this research in the existing knowledge context in the field of Iranian-Gulf relations, providing rationale and discovering gap for the current research. The study is going to explore the impact of the geopolitical determinants on Iranian-Gulf relations during the study period 2011-2018. In addition, it explores the methods of the research which have been conducted in studying this kind of problem. In this present study, the researcher also focuses on the independent variables described in this section. Several studies have investigated the relationship between Iran and Gulf countries (e.g., Halliday, 1996; Hokayem, 2014; Okruhlik, 2003; Pradhan, 2018). Hokayem (2014) conducted a study to see the effect of Syrian civil war among Iran and the Gulf States. This study stated that this relationship was affected negatively at the beginning of the Syrian civil war. More specifically, the relation of Iran with Saudi Arabia and Qatar was in a conflict. Okruhlik (2003) carried out a research to see the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia and this study revealed that the most effective role in the relationship between Iran and Gulf countries is the relation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, this relationship revolves around the competition for legitimacy as Islamic leaders (Okruhlik, 2003).

Some other studies also investigated the relationship between Iran and Gulf states from other corners (e.g., Barnwell, 2018; Grumet, 2015; Nuruzzaman, 2013; Wehrey, 2013; Wehrey, Karasik, Nader, Ghez, & Hansell, 2009). Barnwell (2018) investigated the Gulf States' emergence. It is a study in modern history. This study shows the role was played by Iran in these regions. Wehrey (2013) revealed many important points regarding the relations between Iran and Gulf States. The study aimed to see the sectarianism's politics in the Gulf region including Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia between "2003-2011". A research conducted by Nuruzzaman (2013) to describe the relations between Iran and Gulf States by looking at the intervention of economic, politics, and Saudi military in Bahrain in March 2011. In this field of research, Grumet (2015) studied the new cold war in the Middle East between Gulf States represented by Saudi Arabia as it was highlighted earlier that when anyone talks about Iran and Gulf, it means Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is ensured by Grumet (2015) who states that

"Saudi Arabia and Iran's exploitation of weakened political institutions will have serious effects on security, stability and economic growth in the region. The geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran presents an increasingly complex set of challenges for the Middle East" (p.2).

In addition, other studies investigated such relations between Iran and Gulf States (Mohammed, & Moorthy, 2019; Prasanpot, Maluleem, Luangprapat, & Aree, 2016; Saliba, 2017). Mohammed and Moorthy (2019) conducted a study to the rivalry between Saudi and Iran in the Middle East region and its implications to national security. They stated that the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry has influenced the security of the Middle East region. Point of fact, the Saudi-Iranian relations have been stressed since 1979. They explain that this kind of relation is due to the competition to gain, in the Middle East, a relative power. The conflicts of Saudi Arabia and Iran are at their worst level in decades since these two countries are also involved in several proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen besides the conflict of the Sunni-Shia sectarians between these two countries.

To sum up this discussion, it can be noticed from previous studies two important points. Firstly, previous studies confirm that the relationship between Iran and Gulf States are always in conflict. These studies revealed that these kinds of conflicts refer to some aspect such as political and geographical. This geopolitical aspect was highlighted by Grumet (2015). In addition, some studies reveal that the main two players in Iranian-Gulf states conflict are Saudi Arabia and Iran. In this regard, Pradhan (2018) confirms that Saudi Arabia and Iran are the main two powers in this conflict. Secondly, it is found that these mentioned studies did not investigate directly the geopolitical determinants in this relation. Consequently, the current study is seen to be distinguished as it uses the geopolitical factor as independent factor to identify its effect on the Iranian-Gulf relations. According to the best knowledge of the researcher there is no study investigated this relation by implementing geopolitical determinants.

## 8. Discussion

This study aimed to identify the impact of the geopolitical determinants on Iranian-Gulf relations during the study period 2011-2018. In order to achieve this objective, the following four proposed questions will be answered. Firstly, what is the impact of the leadership in both sides on the reformulation of Iranian-Gulf relations? According to the data found it could be noticed that the Arab Spring has affected negatively the relationship between Iran and Gulf States. This was proved by Hokayem (2014) who states that there is a real conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia with Iran. In this regard, the study reveals that during Syrian civil war the conflict between Iran and Gulf states was clear. This proves that the leaderships' role negatively affected the Iranian-Gulf relations at that time. In fact, this kind of negative effect by leaders of these countries could be noticed when any new issue appears. Regarding to the second questions "What is the impact of the distribution of roles imposed by the nature of the international system on the relations between the two sides?" this question could be answered by looking at the roles played by these countries and it seems that Iran plays an important role in some Arab countries such Lebanon, Syria, Yemen. In addition to these countries Bahrain as one of the Gulf States was also affected by Iran, this kind of role played in these countries because of Sunni-Shia sectarians and it was explained that Iran is representing Shia Cast and Saudi Arabia represent Sunni Cast. It is proven by Okruhlik (2003) who states that Saudi Arabia and Iran consider themselves as Islamic leaders. The next question "What is the impact of the

strategic dimension of Iran with the regional system, especially its near neighborhood with the accompanying issues (waterways, land, borders, minorities and community movements in affecting positively or negatively such relations)?" In fact, these countries have a real conflict regarding these things and one important issue is the religion's issue. In this regard, many studies mention that these geopolitical forces have always affected Iranian-Gulf relations (Dempsey et al., 2017; Guyot, 2011). As for the fourth question, "To what extent does the economic dimension affect these relations?" this economic factor played a significant factor since these countries distribute Oil and they are seen as main sources for this product. Najafinejad and Bahrami (2019) state "The Iran-Iraq conflict over a common border became yet another major problem as the result of endless interpositions and transnational intrusions that have caused ceaseless conflicts with long-term consequences in the Middle East" this study is a recent one and it ensures that there is a conflict is still seen between Iran and Gulf States due to geopolitical determinants.

## 9. Conclusion

As the study offers above, we can clearly see that the Iranian-Gulf relations have an overall negative relationship due to the geopolitical determinant. Starting with the Arab Spring 2011 when it was it is overlapping challenges. The hypotheses show that these proposed factors that could affect positively to the relationship were proven that they affected negatively to the Iranian-Gulf relations. This study also agrees that the main two powers in the cold war are Iran and Saudi Arabia because of different reasons such as oil and they see themselves as the main two Islamic leaders Iran represents Shia Cast and Saudi Arabia represents Sunni Cast. In contrary to some studies that the Gulf States in these days have different views regarding the relation with Iran. For example, it is mentioned in the policy analysis website that some

"Changes in the Arabian Peninsula's geopolitical order and intra-GCC tensions have further undermined the bloc's goal of "Arabian Gulf unity" against Iran. Iran's relatively warm and cooperative ties with Qatar have been both a cause and effect of the GCC dispute and the diplomatic and economic blockade of Qatar that began in mid-2017" (Bahrami, Feb, 2019).

This shows that some changes and the interior relations of Gulf States have been changed towards Iran. Point of fact, the main challenge now is between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This study recommends that policy-makers in these countries must reformulate their policies towards any available issue that could affect negatively to this relationship such as Arab Islands, minorities, waterways, and nuclear file in order to help each other stay and live safely. Furthermore, more studies should be conducted in order to see the situation of these relations more deeply.

## 10. References

- i. Al Mahmood, A. A. (2017). The Iranian Threats to The Security of The Arabian Gulf Region.
- ii. Bahrami, F. (Feb, 2019). Iran and the Gulf states 40 years after the 1979 revolution, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-gulf-states-40-years-after-1979-revolution>
- iii. Barnwell, K. N. (2018). The emergence of the Gulf States: studies in modern history. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8(1), 162-164.
- iv. Dempsey K.E, Qureshi M.M, Ondoma S.M, Dempsey R.J (2017). Effect of geopolitical forces on neurosurgical training in Sub-Saharan Africa. *World Neurosurg* 101,196-202.
- v. Grumet, T. R. (2015). New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry (Unpublished dissertation). University of Denver, Colorado.
- vi. Guyot, A. (2011). Efficiency and dynamics of Islamic investment: evidence of geopolitical effects on Dow Jones Islamic market indices. *Emerging Markets Finance and Trade*, 47 (6) (2011), pp. 24-45
- vii. Halliday, F. (1996). Arabs and Persians beyond the geopolitics of the Gulf. *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien*, (22).
- viii. Hokayem, E. (2014). Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian civil war. *Survival*, 56(6), 59-86.
- ix. Mohammed, A. A., & Moorthy, R. (2019). SAUDI-IRAN RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IMPLICATION TO NATIONAL SECURITY. *e-Bangi*, 16(1).
- x. Najafinejad, A., & Bahrami, S. (2019). Origins of Conflicts Between Iran and Iraq. In *The Dynamics of Iranian Borders* (pp. 27-47). Springer, Cham.
- xi. Nuruzzaman, M. (2013). Politics, economics and Saudi military intervention in Bahrain. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43(2), 363-378.
- xii. Okruhlik, G. (2003). Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations: external rapprochement and internal consolidation, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. X, NO. (2), 113-125.
- xiii. Pradhan, P. K. (2018). The Widening Gulf: Arab Spring and the Saudi-Iranian Divide. In *Contemporary Persian Gulf* (pp. 101-116). Routledge.
- xiv. Prasanpot, O., Maluleem, J., Luangprapat, W., & Aree, S. (2016). *Middle East Dominance Scenario between Iran and Saudi Arabia* (Doctoral dissertation, THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY).
- xv. SALIBA, S. (2017). *THE EFFECTS OF THE SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY ON POLITICS IN LEBANON BETWEEN 2005 AND 2016* (Master's thesis).
- xvi. Wehrey, F. M. (2013). *Sectarian politics in the Gulf: from the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings*. Columbia University Press.
- xvii. Wehrey, F., Karasik, T. W., Nader, A., Ghez, J. J., & Hansell, L. (2009). *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for US Policy*. Rand Corporation.