

**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF  
POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**MASTER THESIS**

**REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE VERSUS COUNTER-  
REVOLUTIONARY STATUS QUO:  
TRACING THE REACTIONS OF QATAR AND THE UNITED  
ARAB EMIRATES TO THE ARAB SPRING**

**AHMET SAFA HÜDAVERDİ**

**THESIS SUPERVISOR: ASSOC. PROF. TALHA KÖSE**

**ISTANBUL, 2020**

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by

**AHMET SAFA HÜDAVERDİ**

**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Political Science and International Relations**

**THESIS SUPERVISOR: ASSOC. PROF. TALHA KÖSE**

**ISTANBUL, 2020**

APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science and International Relations.

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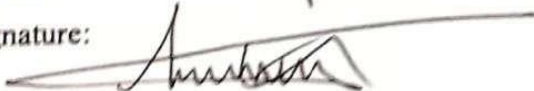
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Signature: 

## ÖZ

### DEVİRİMCİ DEĞİŞİM KARŞI-DEVİRİMCİ STATÜKOYA KARŞI: KATAR VE BİRLEŞİK ARAP EMİRLİKLERİ’NİN ARAP BAHARI’NA VERDİKLERİ TEPKİLERİN İZİNİ SÜRMEK

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Basra Körfezi’nin iki küçük devleti olan Katar ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri (BAE) Arab Baharı’na tepki olarak geleneksel küçük devlet davranış kalıplarını aşarak farklı devrimci ve karşı-devrimci bölgesel güç blokları içinde oldukça müdahaleci ve proaktif bir dış politika izlediler. Bu tez, öncelikle bu iki ülkenin dış politika tepkilerini ayrı ayrı ve daha sonra bu tepkilerin benzerlik ve farklılıklarını karşılaştırmalı bir şekilde analiz ederek takip eden şu soruya uygun bir cevap vermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Katar ve BAE benzer iki küçük devlet olarak Arab Baharı’na yönelik neden ve nasıl farklı devrimci ve karşı devrimci ittifaklar ağı içinde proaktif ve müdahaleci bir dış politika izledi? Bu amaç doğrultusunda, bu çalışma ‘süreç izleme’ (process-tracing) yöntemini kullanarak Katar ve BAE’nin Arab Baharı’na tepkilerini yönlendiren temel mekanizmaları ve bu mekanizmaların operasyonel düzlemde tezahürlerinin belirleyecektir. Daha sonra bu süreçten çıkan sonuçlar neo-klasik realist teori çerçevesinde, Katar ve BAE’nin birim seviyesindeki farklılıklarına odaklanarak karşılaştırılacaktır. Sonuç olarak iddia edilecektir ki, Arab Baharı tarafından tetiklenen bölgesel değişimin yarattığı yapısal değişiklikler bu iki ülkenin bölgesel düzeyde fırsatçı güç arttırma yönünde iddialı ve hırslı bir dış politika izlemeleri noktasında güçlü ve teşvik edici fırsatlar sunmuştur. Bununla birlikte, ara değişken olarak, farklı birim düzeyi özellikleri bu ülkelerin Arab Baharı merkezli bölgesel değişime ilişkin devrimci ve karşı-devrimci pozisyonlarını belirleyen güç ve tehdit algılamalarını şekillendirmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arab Baharı, Katar, Birleşik Arab Emirlikleri, Orta-Doğu, Dış Politika, Neo-Klasik Realizm

## ABSTRACT

### REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE VERSUS COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY STATUS QUO: TRACING THE REACTIONS OF QATAR AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES TO THE ARAB SPRING

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MA in Political Science and International Relations

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By exceeding traditional molds of small states, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as two small states of the Persian Gulf, have conducted very interventionist and proactive foreign policy in response to the Arab Spring within the two region-wide confrontations between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary blocks. This thesis purposes to find a proper answer to the following question by firstly analyzing their foreign policies responses one by one, then comparing the roots of differences and similarities: Why and how did Qatar and the UAE as similar small states pro-actively take different revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions as a reaction to the Arab Spring? To this end, this research wields the process-tracing method to identify causal mechanisms driving these policies and indicating manifestation of these policies at the operational level. Then, the results are compared focusing on their unit-level differences within the neo-classical realist framework. In this context, I argue that the systemic forces unleashed by the Arab Spring-led change created powerful incentives for these states' opportunistic power pursuit across the region. However, unit-level features as an intervening variable shaped their power and threat assessments regarding the Arab Spring-led regional change, which eventually produced their opposing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions.

**Keywords:** the Arab Spring, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the Middle East, Foreign Policy, Neo-Classical Realism

## DEDICATION

It is dedicated to the author's intellectual passion and perseverance.



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## LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MbS	Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud
MbZ	Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan
UAE	The United Arab Emirates



# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“Nothing as much as revolution simultaneously demands hope, inspires hope, and betrays hope.”

Asef Bayat (2017)

### 1.1. Introduction

By outsizeing its role beyond its power, why and how does a small state with limited resources and capacity aggressively and directly intervene in the regional politics and other states' domestic affairs? This could be an extraordinary type of behavior for a small state since small states are defined as states that have a power deficiency because of limited resources and mobilization ability of the present resources. That's why this interesting question deserves an explanation in the context of post-2011 international relations of the Middle East. Two small gulf states, Qatar and the UAE, have played this unusual and assertive role far away from their borders by directly and deeply involving regional politics.

In addition to this, another puzzling question is why did these two similar small states of Qatar and the UAE take conflicting positions as a reaction to the Arab Spring? This is also an interesting question that deserves an explanation. Because as much as their exceptional degree of reactions, their diverging and opposing positions do not fit with the general expectations. In appearance, Qatar and the UAE are similar countries in terms of economical, political, and social indicators. They also share parallel historical state-building and independence experiences and security concerns vis-à-vis the same regional powers.

Qatar and the UAE have taken quite assertive and proactive positions in the unfolding events of the Arab Spring “(B)oth Qatar and the UAE started to act as genuine and

fullfledged regional powers, resorting to both hard and soft power tools and exerting a strong political influence beyond their immediate vicinity” (Del Sarto, Malmvig, & Lecha, 2019, p. 20). These two small states have played a very interventionist regional power role in the two region-wide confrontations between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary blocks. In this vein, according to Karen Young (2013), they “have emerged as activist states in their interest and willingness to intervene both militarily and financially in the politics of neighbouring Arab states” (p. 1).

Qatar has tried to play a pioneering role in the unfolding regional change by supporting the revolts and especially the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups in the uprisings-affected countries. It has provided immense financial, military, and diplomatic supports through different channels in Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia in order to lead the wave of Arab Spring at the expense of confronting its close neighbors in the GCC (Ulrichsen, 2014a; Khatib L. , 2013; Sons & Wiese, 2015).

On the other hand, the UAE has pursued a similar assertive and pro-active foreign policy, but with a different regional vision and political agenda. Under the Saudi-led counter-revolution axis, the UAE has tried to enhance its sphere of influence and to counteract the growing threats in the region through aid and financial tools and military interventions in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Tunisia (Ragab, 2017; Ulrichsen, 2017a; Ibish, 2017).

In this context, in this thesis, I aim at solving these essential research problems. To this end, I will use a neoclassical realist framework by incorporating external structural factors and unit-level features. I argue that the systemic forces unleashed by the Arab Spring-led change created powerful incentives for these states’ opportunistic power pursuit across the region. However, unit-level features as an intervening variable shaped their power and threat assessments regarding this change, which eventually produced their opposing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions.

This kind of answer to this research question is more explanatory and convenient because one-dimensional explanations can not provide us a holistic picture to grasp similarities and differences in Qatar and the UAE’s reactions. For example, just unit-level- based accounts focusing on internal characteristics miss the elucidation of their similar pro-activism and interventionism enabled by the structural environment. On

the other hand, just structural explanations disregarding domestic features cannot explain these similar small states' different positionings in response to the same structural change. That's why I use neoclassical realist theory that enables us to explain both similarities and differences in reactions of Qatar and the UAE to the Arab Spring.

## **1.2. Small States**

Small states were neglected in international relations for a long time due to the great-power focused standpoints. Therefore, with less attention, they are mostly described regarding their vulnerabilities and inabilities for their own securities. However, there are more similar predictions on small states' foreign policies, there is no agreed-upon definition of small states (Galal, 2020; Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). In general, two types of classification are used in the literature: defining small states in terms of (1) absolute and tangible criteria such as size, population, and economy and (2) relational and relative aspects vis-à-vis others (Hakan Wiberg, 1987; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017).

Rickli and Almezaini also discuss small powers' literature by detecting four different traditions: (1) Realist tradition is material power-centered and treats small states with less attention. (2) In a more qualitative way, neo-liberals are concerned with small powers by examining their role and influence within international organizations. (3) Constructivists define small states around intersubjective meanings and perceptions that matter in small states' foreign policies. (4) Smallness is defined by a lack of power that could be material, relational, and normative (Rickli & Almezaini, 2017, pp. 9-11).

In absolute or relative perspectives, all definitions have a common point: that is; small states' foreign and security policies are formalized around the purpose of overcoming their relative deficit of power, vulnerabilities, and weakness. In their traditional security dilemma between protection of their autonomy and maximization of their influence, small states choose the former one, defensive strategy, due to the fact that they cannot conduct an offensive strategy or effectively combine both of them (Rickli, 2008, s. 309-310). As Rothstein (1968) claims that small states need an external security partner to solve their security dilemma, because they cannot solve this

problem with their own internal resources. This means the loss in autonomy for the sake of security.

In this context, their smallness forces them to pursue distinct foreign and security policies from the other states. Small states are weak states in terms of military capacities to protect themselves on their own. This means that the utmost need for them is security via an external patron to overcome vulnerabilities. So, to provide their securities, they generally balance or bandwagon with great powers in response to the structural environment. As Realists argue, this is the common foreign policy act of small states (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Wiberg, 1987). Small states also conduct foreign policy with a low level of involvement and limited agenda in international relations. They often use international organizations, law, and norms and develop norms and niche capabilities to exert influence so as to compensate its smallness (Jesse & Dreyer, 2016, pp. 1-39). Status-seeking is also one of the key motivations for small states' foreign policy for the same purpose (Neumann & De Carvalho, 2015).

In this context, Qatar and the UAE are two small gulf states. There are many works focusing on these states' foreign policies in interaction with broader small states literature by detecting similarities with assumed types of behavior forced by limitations and also their exceptionalism breaking the traditional molds of smallness (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, 2012; Kamrava, 2013; Almezaini & Rickli, 2016b; Roberts D. , 2017b). In the following chapters, these traditional and exceptional features will be discussed in detail. Here, we keep in mind that even Qatar and the UAE have unique characteristics such as geopolitical locations and vast hydrocarbon resources, they are small states that require external security protection to survive. As stated by Miller and Verhoeven (2020), “(d)espite their growing populations, rapid domestic development, oil and gas wealth and high levels of military spending, the Emirates and Qatar remain small states when measured by traditional indicators” (p. 5).

### **1.3. Arab Spring**

At the end of 2010, a Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation has opened the era for the Middle East politics by instigating and encouraging the people to revolt against the authoritarian regimes of their countries. The uprisings started in

Tunisia and, in a short period, spread out in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen. The masses that gathered in cities squares demanded ‘bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity’ around the same slogans expressing deep frustration and anger from the authoritarian repressions. These uprisings rapidly overthrew, in a violent or peaceful way, the ancient regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen; and caused harsh violent confrontations between demonstrators and regimes in Syria and Bahrain. This overall wave of uprisings encompassing the region is labeled as ‘the Arab Spring’. This is “a revolutionary moment of political emancipation and self-determination” of the people shaking the ground of status quo in the Middle East (Gerges F. A., 2014, p. 1).

The roots of the Arab Spring were examined by many scholars. Most of them underscore the multifaceted nature of the reasons that drove the masses uprisings. There is also a consensus in this literature that intertwined with sociopolitical and socioeconomic inequalities, exclusions, frustrations, repressions, and lack of opportunities and hopes, deepening structural problems as extreme poverty, high level unemployment, massive corruption networks of crony capitalism, and deprivation of basic social and political rights lie in the roots of the Arab Spring. (Gerges F. A., 2014; Cammett & Diwan, 2014; Ardiç, 2012). Youth also played a very crucial role during the Arab Spring. Their aspirations, needs, and demands fueled the uprisings (Culbertson, 2016, pp. 6-7). Furthermore, the people's demand for dignity and pride is a striking and distinguishing feature of the Arab Spring as a unifying factor. As Ardiç (2012) notes “(t)he psychological derive underlying all these factors was the search for dignity and respect by the long-oppressed and humiliated people of the Arab world based on their anger and frustration” (p. 17).

The Arab Spring has not achieved a full-fledged revolutionary change in the Middle East yet. There have been relatively successful transitions as in Tunisia and Egypt for a short period. But, in other countries, the earlier hopes stuck in civil wars as in Syria and Yemen. The initial hopes have been replaced by frustrations and sufferings. The early phase of the revolutions came to a deadlock in 2012 with the bloody civil wars. Then, in the post-2013 period, the counter-revolutionary wave has dominated the regional pictures. Many interrelated factors produced these results. The initial earnings could not be properly managed for a good transition, the revolutionaries did not

overthrow the remnants of deep-state crony capitalists and security networks, they did not find financial and political support for their democratic transition process from the Western world, and counterrevolutionary actors resisted the change (Aras & Yorulmaz, 2016, p. 6). Similarly, to explain its deficiencies and failures, Asef Bayat (2017) differentiates the Arab Spring around three points which are lack of intellectual anchor, radicalism driven by ideological discourse, and an essential break from the prior establishment, from the 1970s revolutions. Given these reasons, Bayat (2017) defines the Arab Spring as neither revolutions nor reforms, but “refolutions” which means “revolutionary movements that emerged to compel the incumbent states to change themselves, to carry out meaningful reforms on behalf of the revolution” (pp. 17-18).

Fueled by these similar backgrounds and drivers, the Arab Spring has become the central organizing phenomenon of the region. It challenged the existing authoritarian status quo in the post-2011 period. In return, a massive counter-revolutionary series of reactions have been launched by the Saudi and Emirati alliance (Aras & Falk, 2015). Therefore, it is safe to argue that the Arab Spring-led events including both revolutionary uprisings and reactive counter-revolutionary moves have dominated regional politics. For this reason, across this thesis, I use the concept of the Arab Spring as an umbrella term that includes the whole revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes that happened after 2011.

The Middle East regional system has been struggling with severe multiple crises since 2011. The sequential popular Arab uprisings against the old authoritarian regimes have caused harsh transition processes in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, which has enveloped the region with a huge instability in which multiple regional and international actors fight for filling this power vacuum in favor of their regional vision and interests. In the post-2011 era, the order has fractured in many aspects; states collapsed, internal and interstate conflicts proliferated around proxy politics of regional states, and authoritarian ruling-bargain descended (Cammack, et al., 2017).

There are numerous studies on the regional effects of the Arab Spring. This literature revolves around some common points: the weakening role of the US, the proliferation of non-state actors, the collapsed Arab states, regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi

Arabia around sectarian discourse, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the emergence of regional players such as Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Around all these factors, as a consequence of the Arab Spring-led process, Mehran Kamrava explains the changing regional hierarchy and alliance formation (Kamrava, 2018a); and multipolarity and turmoil (Kamrava, 2018b). Kristina Kausch (2015) points out the competitive multipolarity in the region. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, et al (2019) stresses the growing number of division issues challenging the regional order and instigating the regional turmoil and instability. Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmaz (2016) contend that the new geopolitics of the Arab Spring ended the old order and it is now working on the formation of the new one. These intertwined regional conflicts are defined by Marc Lynch (2016) as ‘the new Arab wars’. On the other hand, Enes Tüzgen (2019) also approaches this regional crisis from the constructivist perspective and evaluates the Arab Spring as a systemic crisis over normative consensus in the regional state-system between defenders of the old system: status-quo powers and defenders of the change to democracy: revisionist powers. All of these arguments stress one point: the Arab Spring-led regional order in the Middle East is in deep crisis.

#### **1.4. Literature**

In the post-2011 era, with the effects of the Arab Spring, the region has witnessed the rise of influence of the Gulf states across the region. There is quite a consensus in the literature about the growing international and regional weightiness of the gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, thanks to their enormous hydrocarbon reserves and financial resources. Therefore, in the last decade, so many academic works were published in order to grasp this change and politics within the Persian Gulf (Ulrichsen & Held, 2012; Ehteshami A. , 2013; Kamrava, 2011). Moreover, due to the falling of the old power centers in the region, as argued in many studies, the center of gravity has shifted to the Gulf monarchies which they have attempted to translate their accumulated financial resources into political influence in the region by exploiting the power vacuum (Krieg, 2019b; Ehteshami A. , 2013; Sons & Wiese, 2015). So, the post-2011 era has witnessed an essential shift in regard to the GCC countries' rising involvement in the region from dollar diplomacy to more direct involvement in terms of politics, military, and economy in an

opportunistic way. This new politics of interventionism or the 'gulf moment' has become prevalent across the Middle East (Matthiesen, 2017, pp. 43-47).

In this context, changing power configuration in the regional system, rising and falling powers, shifting behaviors of the external powers, intensified wars, and new ideas of the Arab Spring about the regional order, all of them, have caused the formation of new opportunities and threats for the regional powers. Therefore, the states reacted to this change according to their threat and interest calculations. In general, Valentina Koskadinova (2015) claims that there are three key drivers guiding the GCC states' responses to the Arab uprisings: preventing the diffusion of uprisings from their borders, managing the course in the uprisings-affected countries for their interests, and taking advantage from the opportunities allowed by the structural shifts in the region for power projection and domination. Also, as a common reaction to the uprisings, the GCC states preemptively spent approximately \$ 250 billion in order to preclude the spread of the Arab Spring in the Gulf (Miller R. , 2016, p. 202).

For these purposes, to counter the Arab Spring-led threats and therewithal to exploit the regional power vacuum, the region-wide Saudi-led counter-revolution (Kamrava, 2012) or the authoritarian counter-revolution process has been commenced by the Saudi-the UAE axis (Aras & Yorulmaz, 2016). Under this changing dynamics, the Gulf-based security studies have also increased to re-evaluate the gulf security system and its connection with the broader regional order in the post-2011 environment due to the proliferation of intertwined external and internal threats such as regional and domestic effects of Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Spring (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017b; Guzansky, 2015b; Kamrava, 2018c).

In fact, the Saudi reaction is predictable. But what is unexpected is the reactions of the small gulf states: Qatar and the UAE. Starting from the beginning, these two countries have pursued very assertive and pro-active foreign policies by “punching above (their) weights” (Roberts D. B., 2011). Qatar has tried to play a pioneering role in the unfolding regional change by supporting the revolts and especially the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups in the uprisings-affected countries. It has provided immense financial resources through different channels at the expense of confronting its close neighbors in the GCC as in the case of the 2014 and 2017 gulf crises which

are the result of clashed value-based regional visions for the Middle East after the Arab Spring (Krieg, 2019b).

To explain Qatar's unconventional foreign policy and its motivations, notable literature has emerged. In his book, Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2014a) examines the political and historical contexts, drivers, and implications of Qatar's approach to the Arab Spring. David Roberts (2017b) focuses on Qatar's security considerations, diversification, and state-branding strategies in a historical context. Babak Mohammadzadeh (2017) clarifies Qatar's activist, quite visible, and risky foreign policy as a status-seeking. Mustafa Yetim (2014) clarifies Qatar's response to the Arab Spring as a state-led change for regime survival in order to adjust Qatari foreign policy to the potential democratic transition in the regional order with the Arab Spring. Lastly, in his distinctive book, Mehran Kamrava (2013) traces the big politics of this small state and argues that three interrelated drivers explain Qatar's big politics: the changing regional balance of power in the Middle East and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the advantage of Qatar, the change in the nature of power in international relations and political and economic mightiness inside the country.

On the other hand, the UAE has pursued a similar assertive and pro-active foreign policy, but with a different regional vision and political agenda. Under the Saudi-led counter-revolution axis, the UAE has tried to enhance its sphere of influence and to counteract the growing threats in the region through military, aid, and financial interventions (Ragab, 2017). Robert Mason (2018) explains this activism of the UAE by stressing two basic drivers: the existential fear of Iran's regional policies and the political and violent Islamism. Before the Arab Spring, Khalid S. Almezaini (2012) examines the UAE's foreign policy from a constructivist perspective around the constitutive roles of identities, ideas, and foreign aid. Nevertheless, in the post-2011 period, because of the structural forces and geopolitical outcomes, realist principles such as state survival and sovereignty have become more dominant in the UAE's foreign policy (Almezaini K. , 2018). Leach Sherwood (2017) elucidates this transformation under the risk-diversification strategy of the UAE. To examine the main political and economic dynamics enabling the UAE to emerge as a prominent regional power, in his book, Ulrichsen (2017a) attempts to give insight to a whole picture of the UAE.

These policies of Qatar and the UAE have brought about a reconsideration of the need for the literature about the role of small states in international relations. Therefore, in 'the Small Gulf States', the writers reconsider the role of small states in international relations. Particularly, they focus on the foreign and security policies of the small gulf states around the changing security dynamics of the Gulf and the Middle East in order to explain political, economic, and military activisms of these states in the unfolding regional system (Almezaini & Rickli, 2016b). In this regard, Ennis (2018) explains the growing role and power of these countries through the concept of 'entrepreneurial power' which is constituted by the combination of different forms of power to exercise of power and pursuit of status. Ulrichsen (2012) underscores three enabling factors to overcome their constraints coming from being small state/power: generational change in leadership of Qatar and the UAE, diversification projects and economic vision, and changing dynamics of the nature of power.

There are also a few comparative studies focusing on the reactions of Qatar and the UAE to the Arab Spring. In one of them, David B. Roberts (2017a) examines the political Islam and the MB experiences of these countries. By combining Walt's first and second images, Roberts (2017a) concludes that dissimilar state structures in Qatar and the UAE forged antithetical experiences for the ruling elites with the Muslim Brotherhood, which has shaped their reactions to the Arab Spring. In another study, Emma Soubrier (2016) compares foreign policy and security strategies of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates before and after the Arab Spring and contends that domestic factors are crucial to explaining these countries' distinct security strategies, credibility, and state-building of the UAE and state-branding through international visibility of Qatar, which are shaped around leaders' perceptions and strategic culture. Miller and Verhoeven (2020) examines Qatar and the UAE foreign policy articulations aiming to overcome their smallness with limited power capacities in order to secure their sovereignty and improve their influence and autonomy against Iran and Saudi Arabia through different pathways in a troubled region.

In a nutshell, the literature indicates that the Arab Spring has triggered structural shifts in the Middle East system, which created both new opportunities and new threats driving the foreign policies of the small gulf states in the post-2011 era. In this context, there is a need to study policy reactions and drivers of Qatar and the UAE to Arab

Spring in a holistic and comparative way by combining domestic issues and external changes in order to acquire deeper insight of these small states' proactive and divergent foreign policies exceeding their capacities. As mostly focused in the literature, the MB and political Islam matters alone are not sufficiently explanatory. Hence, these two countries must be comparatively examined by focusing on their relations with global and regional powers, threat perceptions, and foreign policy tools.

### **1.5. Research Objectives, Questions, and Hypothesis**

This thesis purposes to find proper answer to one main and two interrelated questions. The main question is why and how did similar small states of Qatar and the UAE take conflicting revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions as a reaction to the Arab Spring? To respond to this question, at the outset, I will attempt to respond to the following questions: How did Qatar and the UAE respond to the change in the Middle East? What are the main drivers and dynamics of these responses?

As indicated above, there is a need to study policy reactions of Qatar and the UAE to the Arab Spring and drivers of these reactions in a holistic way by combining unit-level features and external structural changes in order to explain these small states' proactive foreign policies exceeding their capacities within opposing regional blocks. A separate examination of these two cases in the post-2011 will address not only the drivers and processes leading to foreign policy formulation beyond the traditional molds for small states in case of Qatar and the UAE but also how two small gulf states significantly affected the regional politics in intertwined conflicts of the Middle East.

Qatar and the UAE are very similar countries under the same regional structure. But they took separate and conflicting positions in the post-2011 era. Therefore, to solve this puzzle, there is a need to work in a comparative way on these two countries by elaborating their differences in foreign and security policy orientations, threat perceptions, relations with external actors, and leader level perceptions.

In this context, the main objective of this study is to grasp and to address the over-reacted policy responses and drivers of these responses of the two small gulf states Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to the Arab Spring by detecting the mechanisms driving these policies and indicating the manifestation of these policies on the

operational level. By doing this, I intend to contribute to the literature on comparative foreign policy analysis of Qatar and the UAE by incorporating unit-level and structural variables to explain their post-2011 foreign policies. On the other hand, by comparing Qatar and the UAE, this study intends to show the importance of domestic features in responding to the structural changes.

All these goals of my project are valuable because firstly, they will serve to comprehend the regional conflict dynamics and competing regional revolutionary and counter-revolutionary visions since Qatar and the UAE represents microcosms for these competing agendas in the post-2011 era. Secondly, the present works on foreign policies of the UAE and Qatar will be enhanced thanks to the causal mechanisms that will be formed and traced in this comparative study. Thirdly, this study will contribute to the reconsideration of roles and capacities of small states in the regional balance of power and politics. Lastly, a comparative study of these too similar countries will indicate how different threat perceptions to regime security can cause separate policies under the same structure environment.

## **1.6. Methodology**

The data will use for this study will be collected by the primary resources; diplomatic declarations and news and secondary resources; related articles and books. In this study, the gathered data will be analyzed through the ‘process tracing’ method by tracing causal mechanisms to explain the policy responses of Qatar and the UAE. I use this method because tracing causal mechanisms enables us to make solid evidence-based inferences about causal relations and to grasp how a cause produces an outcome (Beach, 2016). Simply, process-tracing attempts to identify and trace causal mechanisms, which connects the independent and dependent variables, in order to make within-case inferences. In general, process tracing consists of three stages: theorization of causal mechanisms, operationalization of concepts via empirical manifestations, and generalization of findings. In the operationalization stage, there are four types of empirical evidence to observe and analyze: patterns, sequences, traces, and accounts. There are three different types of process tracing for different research purposes. Theory centric ones: theory-testing process-tracing and theory-building process-tracing and case centric one: explaining outcome process tracing

(Beach & Pedersen, 2013). These are general frameworks and can be adopted in a more flexible way for specific research. In this context, my study fits into both explaining the outcome model to clarify the policy reactions of Qatar and the UAE in the post-2011 era in a case-centric way and theory-testing model to test separately my hypotheses. In this study, Qatar and the UAE cases will be handled one by one so as to allow within-case inferences.

Then, the results will be compared focusing on their unit-level differences so as to explain how two small states under the same regional order with so similar economic, political, and social features took two different kinds of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions in response to the same systemic change. This variance will be elucidated by the different threat and power perceptions with regard to the Arab Spring.

### **1.7. Structure of the Study**

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first is an introduction chapter that introduces the general components of the research questions and objectives, literature, and methodology. The second chapter examines Qatar's foreign policy response to the Arab Spring with its basic motivations and the manifestation of these policies across the region. Similarly, the third one traces the UAE's reaction to the Arab Spring by uncovering its policy drives and goals. The arguments are also supported in these two chapters with solid and varied case examples. The fourth chapter concentrates on the root of differences in the states' reaction to the Arab Spring in a comparative way. To this end, within the neo-classical framework, their diverging reactions will be analyzed as a result of varied assessments of the Arab Spring-led change that stem from different threats and power perceptions about it. The last chapter concludes the discussion, holistically re-frame the overall arguments and demonstrates possible policy implications and recommendations; and deficiencies of the research.

## CHAPTER II

### QATAR'S REACTION TO THE ARAB SPRING

#### 2.1. Introduction

As a small state in an insecure region, Qatar conducted a very bold and ambitious type of foreign policy across the region beyond its power and status during the Arab Spring. The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate how Qatar reacted to the Arab Spring and why it reacted in that way. This will be the first puzzle of this section to solve since what Qatar did is an extraordinary type of behavior for a small state. As the second puzzle, Qatar's main motivation behind its Arab Spring policy will be discussed whether it is the ideological or typical pursuit of power behavior? It is important to clarify because, at first glance, the general pattern might prompt us to the easy conclusion that is Qatar acted to fulfill its ideological agenda. But, the main claim of this chapter is the opposite one. These two puzzles also make the case of Qatar worth and interesting to elucidate and examine.

In this chapter, the focus is on Qatar's foreign policy response to the Arab Spring. To grasp this, firstly, Qatar's general foreign policy dynamics and features will be introduced. Then, the Arab Spring's effect on this foreign policy, and the triggered change by the Arab Spring will be explained. Finally, in the main part, the motivations and dynamics behind Qatar's reaction to the Arab Spring will be traced through causal mechanisms that enable us to make solid evidence-based inferences about causal relations and to grasp how a cause produces an outcome.

## **2.2. Foreign Policy of Qatar**

### **2.2.1. Before the Arab Spring**

Qatar has become a new emerging prominent power of the Middle East and it has managed this thanks to its distinctive “pragmatic” (Khatib, 2014) and “hyperactive” (Kamrava, 2013) foreign policy.

Qatar is a small and relatively new country with 333,000 Qatari citizens in 2019. The other 89.5% part of the population consists of foreign workers coming from different countries (Snoj, 2019). This small population is blessed with enormous hydrocarbon reserves. According to U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), Qatar has the world’s third-largest proved 871,585 bfc natural gas reserves. It is the largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter in the world as the fourth-largest natural gas producer. It also has 25,244 million barrels of oil reserves. The hydrocarbon sector accounts for %49 of the state revenues (Qatar, 2015).

Beyond its smallness in terms of population and geographic scale, Qatar has pursued a distinctive and pro-active foreign policy as a part of its survival strategy in a highly unstable and hostile region. In this regard, Qatar is a good example of how a small state upgrades its status and reputation to overcome its limitations by using conventional and unconventional methods to survive in a volatile region (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, p. 41). Well-designed and implemented policy of hedging, global state-branding campaigns, visioner political will of ruling elites, and state capacity stemming from huge resource wealth, all of these have paved the way to transform Qatar into a small but influential state (Kamrava, 2013, p. 48).

As Rosenau argues, states' foreign policy is a product of a combination of external and internal factors. On the one hand, systemic pressures from outside, on the other hand, domestic politics and leader-level features (Rosenau, 1966). Qatar’s foreign policy is determined around these frameworks as well. Lina Khatib (2013) states four drivers of Qatari foreign policy. The utmost one is to provide for its security and stability as does every state. The second is to maintain stable relations with Iran swinging between

balancing and cooperation. The pursuit of power to enlarge its regional influence is the third motivation. The final one is to brand itself progressively to appeal to the Western community by making itself valuable to protect (pp. 418-420). Around similar matters and a relational perspective, Kamrava (2013) stresses that four dynamics determine Qatari foreign policy. One of them is its relations with Saudi Arabia, which can be periodized before and after the 1990s because the first Gulf war indicated the inability of the Saudi security umbrella for Qatar. The second dynamic is over-reliance on the US since 1990. The third one is the relations with Iran. Lastly, the wealthiness of Qatar fuels its diplomatic activisms (pp. 71-72).

In its relations with external actors, traditionally, the foundation of the security of Qatar has always been alliance formation with the bigger states as a historical tactic. Before the Ottoman, then British Empires provided the required security for Qatar in a strategic location. After the discovery of oil, to protect the state and oil, the importance of this kind of security arrangement became more valuable. Given that reason, Qatari elites turned their orientation to Saudi Arabia as a new protector after the British withdrawal in 1971. But then, the combination of the aspiration for more autonomy of the new leadership in Qatar and the regional threats posed by Iraq and the inability of Saudi Arabia during the Kuwait invasion in 1991 prompted Qatar to deal with a new patron (Roberts D. B., 2016a, p. 13). So, the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) was signed with the US in 1992. After that point, Qatar has left its security to the US's hands via strategic bases, Al Udeid Air Base, which is the biggest US base in the Middle East, and arms sales (Katzman, 2020a, pp. 15-18).

Just as oil transformed Qatar from a pearl hunting poor country to modern and rich one (Fromherz, 2017), LNG transformation under Hamad's leadership has further moved Qatar to another level: from being a rich country to a super-rich one. Qatar possesses the largest natural gas field in the world. The North Field, which is shared with Iran, is equivalent to 10% percent of the world's gas reserves (North Field). So, to overcome geopolitical barriers risking the transportation of gas via pipelines, it has started to invest LNG infrastructure more than \$120 billion with the partnership of ExxonMobil. Qatar exported its first LNG in 1995. Then, it has become the leading LNG exporter since 2006 (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014b, p. 5). So, being super-rich thanks to LNG is one of the cornerstones of Qatari foreign policy. Revenues coming from

LNG exports underpin costly Qatari soft-power tools from Al-Jazeera to different attractive international organizations in the country, Qatari state-branding initiatives, and investments of Qatari sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA). It also makes Qatar an essential energy partner for many important states via long-term supply agreement, which promotes Qatar's security by increasing mutual interdependence and other powerful and divergent countries' direct stake in Qatar. Stability in Qatar and the continuation of energy flow are crucial to LNG importer countries from Qatar for their energy supply security. So, it can be concluded that the gas-infused wealth functions as the engine of Qatari foreign policy and Hamad's vision (Roberts D. B., 2016a).

At the leader-level, just as the other Gulf monarchies, the decision-making process is centralized by a small circle of ruling elites. Emir Hamad (1995-2013) and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, foreign minister and prime minister between 2007-2013, are the architects of the rise of Qatar and its foreign policy in the international arena as a dynamic and innovative regional actor. Besides these two, at a lower level, Sheikh Hamad's wife Mowza and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad (current emir) have played an effective role in decision-making processes (Sulaib, 2017; Kamrava 2013; Ulrihsen 2014a). The present image of Qatar and its foreign policy dynamics rest on carefully designed strategies that are developed by the small circle of ruling elite under the leadership of Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani since 1995. After the assumption of power with a bloodless coup in 1995, he initiated a new era for Qatari state-building inside and image-building outside. These processes have directly shaped the Qatari foreign policy. Firstly, Shaikh Hamad consolidated his power inside by providing the discipline within the ruling family. Then, he put Qatar under the US security umbrella. These two actions constitute the secure ground enabling Hamad to actualize his vision to boost the international status of Qatar aggressively (Kamrava M. , 2014, p. 160). In this regard, it can be argued that the personal-level story and vision of Hamad for Qatari state-branding and soft-power orientation form the backbone of Qatari foreign policy.

In a nutshell, geopolitical considerations, the US military protection, and domestic stability with elite cohesion and state capacity inside constitute the essential features of Qatari foreign policy. In an unstable and insecure environment, geopolitics enforces

Qatar to adopt well-calculated foreign policy seeking to provide sovereignty and independence of the country by eschewing from more powerful countries' total penetration. The rooted in revenues coming from large hydrocarbon exports and elite cohesion, the state capacity, and elites will have enabled Qatar to pursue activist foreign policy under the US military protection by cultivating niche diplomacy in the regional and international arena (Kamrava M. , 2014). In this sense, as Mehram Kamrava (2013) points out, in foreign policy

Qatar's power and influence are derived from a carefully combined mixture of diplomacy, marketing, domestic politics, regional diplomacy, and, through the strategic use of its sovereign wealth fund, increasing access to and ownership overprized commercial resources (p. 49).

### **2.2.1.1. Strategies in Qatar's Foreign Policy**

#### **2.2.1.1.1. Hedging Strategy**

Small states are defined in literature as states that have a power deficiency because of limited resources and mobilization ability of the existing resources. Therefore, its foreign and security policies are formalized around the purpose of overcoming this relative deficit of power. In their traditional security dilemma between protection of their autonomy and maximization of their influence in their security, small states choose the former one, defensive strategy, since they cannot conduct an offensive strategy (Rickli, 2008, pp. 309-310). The third alternative is the hedging strategy as a middle way approach. It aims at benefiting from strong alignment for security, at the same time, maintaining some autonomy. Especially, in a condition that risks and threats are vague and multifaced with high stakes, small states adopt the hedging strategy to improve their best chance for survival by conducting multiple policy alternatives (Rickli & Almezaini, 2017, pp. 12-15). Yoel Guzansky (2015c) examines this strategy in the Gulf context. He claims that the Gulf states consciously conduct hedging as a mixed strategy against the Iran threat instead of only balancing or bandwagoning strategies. For them, particularly Qatar and Oman, the ability to influence their protector partner is secondary to the protection obtained against the adversary.

So, Kamrava (2014) states that “as a small state in a rough neighborhood, Qatar needs to craft its foreign policy with deliberate care and caution, with an eye toward the Iranian behemoth in the North, the Saudi giant in the South, and the omnipresent US empire” (p. 166). Given this fragile location, to compensate its power deficiency against Saudi Arabia and Iran, “Qatar had no option but to pursue a policy mixture of appeasing, balancing, and relying on the protection of a regional or international power” (Başkan, 2016, p. 40). Therefore, to protect some relative autonomy while taking its security for granted, Qatar has chosen a well-adjusted hedging strategy that enables the pursuit of an offensive strategy in niche areas such as mediation by conducting diplomatic hyperactivism, for hedging allows it to keep open the line of communication with everyone. For instance, Qatar has put its security in the hands of the US by keeping its military capacity at the minimum level, which means taking big bets on US protection. On the other hand, by maintaining diplomatic relations with other players perceived by the US and the other GCC states as a threat such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, Qatar takes smaller bets to Iran and Islamists in order to increase its survivability and policy options in the insecure gulf. This strategy of Qatar has been enabled by domestic stability, elites’ relative autonomy, and richness inside since all of these features give the resilience and wide and quick room for maneuver. Al Jazeera and well-rooted relations with the Islamist groups are the main elements of Qatari hedging at the operational level (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 72-75).

#### **2.2.1.1..2. State-branding strategy**

Although Qatar is a relatively new independent state, it is also one of the well-known states of the Persian Gulf. This reputation is boosted by its immense natural gas reserves and attentively calibrated policy attempts under the Qatari state-branding aiming at putting a tiny state on the map. So, what is branding for a state? “A brand is best described as a customer’s idea about a product; the ‘brand state’ comprises the outside world’s ideas about a particular country” (Ham, 2001, p. 2). Especially, for small states, branding functions as a survival strategy to overcome constraints and vulnerabilities of smallness. Unlike nearly irreversible characteristics of being small in terms of population, geopolitical conditions, and physical size, perceptions, and ideas can be changed by state-branding initiatives. Therefore, it is an asset to make the state distinguish in a specific context by shaping ideas regarding its image in the

international stage so as to enhance the state's value, legitimacy, and visibility. Qatar's branding strategy is one of the most successful instances. It includes many fronts. Politically, it has hosted major international conferences and meetings of international organizations as an active participant. Qatar has branded its image around economic purposes via being leading a LNG exporter and a business-oriented modern state, and Qatar Airways. Besides these, by hosting varied international sports organizations in different branches, it has attracted the attention of international spectators. Ambitious high-class modern museums, the Education City initiative, which contains local branches of prominent world-class universities such as Georgetown University, and the Qatar Science and Technology Park can be labeled under the cultural state-branding efforts of Qatar. The goals of Qatari branding initiatives are, firstly, to distinguish it from neighbors by underscoring and creating its distinctiveness, secondly, to increase its recognition, legitimacy, and prestige as an important and influential actor (Petersen, 2006, pp. 743-748). The state-branding also boosts national identity and pride inside of the country, particularly in countries like Qatar in which historical bonds and national narratives are weak. In other words, state-branding serves as nation-building in the domestic realm (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, p. 39).

Qatari branding is inclined on its presentation of itself as a western-oriented international ally of the West. There are three gains here. This inclination, firstly, provides the country security under the US military protection by hosting its bases. Secondly, it places Qatar in the international economy and business networks, which enables it to secure its gas exports and economic diversification projects. Finally, it diverts the Western attention and democratic rhetoric from its shortcoming in domestic political issues (Khatib, 2013, pp. 419-420).

Consequently, as a part of its broader hedging and security strategy to avoid what Kuwait faced in 1990, in Qatari case,

state branding through the strategic leveraging of soft power has the potential to create long-term mutual interdependencies which can ultimately enhance security and stability and give other countries a powerful stake in pursuing strong relations with Qatar (Mohammadzadeh, 2017, p. 27).

### **2.2.1.1.3. Mediations as a Leverage**

One of the key distinguishing characteristics of Qatar's foreign policy is its role as a mediator in regional conflicts. According to the Qatari constitution, Qatar's foreign policy is "based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes" (The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar). So, in this line, Qatar has been involved in plenty of regional issues as a mediator. It mediated peace talks between Chad and Sudan (2009), Darfur (2008-2010), and Djibouti and Eritrea (2010). Qatar also attempted to negotiate in internal disputes between government and Houties in Yemen (2008-2010). The Lebanon deal is the most famous negotiation effort of Qatar improving its credibility. The agreement in 2008 established stable relations between Hezbollah and other parties in Lebanon. These are prominent examples that Qatari mediation took place (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014b, p. 6). In return, Qatar has been branded as an "honest and neutral broker" (Kamrava, 2011, p. 556), "can-do actor" (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014b, p. 6), "non-stop mediator" (Worth, 2008) in the region.

There are three striking features of Qatari mediation, similar to its overall foreign policy. It is highly personalized around the small circle of the ruling elites, particularly Emir Hamad and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, financially empowered by massive Qatari prosperity which is wielded as carrot and leverage during the mediations to obtain quick and successful results, and image of neutrality and impartiality. Keeping communication channels open with divergent actors has facilitated the image-building of Qatar as a neutral and impartial mediator. It has located itself as a common ground between hostile actors. Therefore, it was the better option as a mediator as in the case of Lebanon due to Qatar's good relations with Hezbollah (Barakat, 2012, pp. 23-24). As Kamrava (2011b) stresses, these factors are both the biggest strength and weakness of Qatar's mediation efforts. In the short-term, they strengthen the hands of Qatari mediator to get quick outcomes on the negotiation table; yet, they fail in the implementation of long-term peacebuilding and consolidation efforts after the peacemaking due to the deficient institutional and diplomatic capacity.

The main drivers behind this mediator role of Qatar are its survival strategy, hedging, and state-branding agenda as a seeking of status, security, and independent foreign

policy. So, as a continuation of these, Qatar has developed niche diplomacy around conflict resolution and mediation efforts (Kamrava, 2011b, p. 540). In other words, Qatar's mediation efforts function as a part of its state-branding to enhance Qatar's global reputation and it aims to maximize the interest-based influence of Qatar by sustaining close relations with friends and enemies (Mohammadzadeh, 2017, p. 32). Hence, it can be contended that "mediation is a foreign policy strategy used by Qatar as a way of protecting military and political security" (Doğan, 2017, p. 44).

To sum up, since 1995, Qatar has formalized its foreign policy around state-branding, soft-power, and hedging strategies in an intertwined way through adopting diplomatic hyperactivism and a neutral mediator role in order to elevate its international reputation, influence, and legitimacy. State-branding and soft-power strategies have been shaped by the discourse of societal, intellectual, and economic liberalization in a Western-oriented way under the pursuit of status-seeking for a small state (Mohammadzadeh, 2017, p. 30). All of these strategies have boosted and promoted the emerging leading regional of Qatari state as a new regional power in the Middle East. In addition to this, as Betül Doğan (2017) claims, the foreign policy assisted by the aforementioned varied strategies functions to promote military and political security of the small gulf monarchy by increasing its military security and political legitimacy (p. 30).

Branding is about what and how we think about something. In this sense, in 2011, before the uprisings began in the Middle East, Qatar won the 2022 World Cup organizations as a result of its state-branding policy. Therefore, what is clear that just before the uprisings, Qatar was at the peak of its power promoted by the issues mentioned above as a newly emerging power; that is, it had an appetite for being a regional power. Qatar was ready to see the upcoming events as an opportunity to prove its credibility to the western world on the one hand (Al Horr, et al., 2016, p. 361), and to improve its regional penetration, on the other hand.

## **2.2.2. Foreign Policy of Qatar in the Post-2011 Era**

### **2.2.2.1. Change in Qatari Foreign Policy**

In the post-2011 period, particularly between 2011-2014, foreign policy assertiveness and activism of Qatar have peaked under the regional turmoil caused by the Arab Spring and the new direction of Qatar's foreign policy ruptured from some abovementioned tenets. It has moved from mediation to direct interventionism and from being impartial to being on the side with revolutionaries (Ashmawyi, 2014, p. 22; Barakat, 2012; Echagüe, 2015, p. 68).

The popular uprisings, starting from Tunisia to Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen against authoritarian regimes, toppled the old rulers with a domino effect across the region under the democratic demands. In comparison to its neighbors in the Gulf and the Middle East, Qatar has been relatively immune from the uprising thanks to domestic consolidation inside as the strongest chain of the Gulf states in sociopolitical terms (Abdulla, 2015, pp. 43-44).

In the beginning, due to the fact that it had just settled its weak relations with Syria and Egypt in 2010 and Saudi Arabia had expressed its prudent stance in favor of the current status quo and stability, Qatari policy reaction to the uprisings was slow and hesitant under the GCC discourse. But, when it realized that the uprisings wave would be likely to overthrow the old system, it put its power and bet on of side of revolutions (Khatib, 2013, pp. 421-422).

The overall direction, Qatar took a revisionist and revolutionary position and acted as a power broker in Libya, Egypt, and Syria (Kamrava, 2018c, p. 121) by trying to play a pioneering role in the unfolding regional change by supporting the revolts and especially the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups in the uprisings-affected countries (Kamrava, 2018c, p. 121). It provided immense financial, military, and diplomatic supports through different channels in Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia to lead the wave of Arab Spring at the expense of confronting its close neighbors in the GCC. In Libya, Qatar took a direct role both in the overthrowing of the Qaddafi regime by canalizing the international community to military intervention, coordinating and

arming revolutionaries, and being part of the NATO forces on the field and in the post-Qaddafi era by shaping the political future of Libyans. Similarly, after the Libya triumph, Qatar attempted to play the same role in Syria against Bashar al-Assad regime, to this end, it tried to mobilize international and Arab communities to intervene in Syria in favor of revolutionaries and democratic change. Despite these efforts and huge financial and weapon assistance to rebellions, Qatari policy failed in Syria. Also, Qatar built strong political and economic relations with post-revolution governments in Egypt and, in less intensity, in Tunisia. Unlike these aggressive positions manifested as embracing the direction of change, Qatar's actions in the boundaries of the GCC were compatible, not conflicting, with the general policies under Saudi Arabia's domination (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, pp. 116-144).

### **2.3. Tracing the Driving Forces Behind Qatar's Foreign Policy in the Arab Spring**

The aim of this section is to shed light on why Qatar reacted to the region-wide revolts in a revisionist way that directly supported and encouraged the Arab Spring. In this regard, I will attempt to answer the following questions. How can a small state's this kind of assertiveness and foreign policy activism be elucidated? Why and how did Qatar play this unusual and outsizing role beyond its power by taking a revolutionary position in a risky way? What is the main driver and dynamic behind the foreign policy orientation of Qatar? Is it based on ideological and normative considerations or pragmatic and interest-based pursuit of power understanding the main impulse for Qatar's foreign policy response to the Arab Spring? In short, is the propulsive force ideological or interest-based?

#### **2.3.1. Ideological Stance?**

At first glance, it is straightforward to conclude that Qatar's foreign policy was driven by ideological considerations overlapping with the new ascending forces' agenda for the region. Its policies were coherent with the Islamist and revolutionary actors demanding democratic transition across the region since Qatar promoted the spread of revolutionary ideas against the former regimes and the Islamists in power by putting its power behind the overall course of the Arab Spring. In this regard, this stance can

be hypothesized that the change in Qatari foreign policy and the abovementioned assertive reactions to the uprisings in favor of revolutions were driven by ideological causes. In general, Qatar backed the ideas of revolution and its winners, which are the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, by advocating the democratic re-design of the regional order around the will of the people and political Islam.

Al Jazeera Arabic's coverage of the uprisings and Qatari elites' statements demonstrate that Qatar's approach to the events was shaped by normative considerations at the discursive level. Due to the state identity, Qatar did not see the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat and, as investigated by Ehteshami and Mohammadi (2017), coverage in media via Al Jazeera and leader's discourses indicate that Qatar's inclination is more pan-Arabism-centered rather than pure pan-Islamism. So, ideologically, Arabness has been preserved as a primary political discourse despite all turmoil in the post-2011 period.

As a reaction to the uprisings and bloody suppression of these uprisings by the regimes in the region, Qatar put itself forward as a voice of democratically oriented pro-change revolutionary block by advocating the protection of human rights and democratic expression. It located itself as a bridge conveying demands of the uprising to the international society between Islamist revolutionaries and Western countries (Yetim, 2014, p. 397). As marked by the statement of one of the high-level members of the ruling family, Qatar's coverage of the uprisings centered on democratic themes, "We believe in democracy, we believe in freedom, we believe in dialogue, and we believe in that for entire region" (Krauss, 2011). During the course of the process, the Qatari leadership embraced the change by publicly backing and advocating democratic values and the role of Islamists actors in the new order. Because of the fact that Qatar threw its backing behind Islamist groups, mostly the MB that rose from its ashes via democratic elections, Qatar's foreign policy direction is illustrated that it is in ideological alignment with an Islamist agenda across the region (Hassan, 2017). The Qatari elites publicly encouraged the legitimate ascendancy of Islamists in the democratic transition processes by stressing the significance of cooperative relations instead of fear (Freer, 2018, pp. 119-124). Even this leading position of Qatar has led to some assessments that Emir Hamad wants to position himself as the new Gamal Abdel Nasser, who is the Egyptian leader of pan-Arabism between 1956-1968, with

Islamist ideology supporting the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups (Khalaf & Fielding, 2013).

This general ideologically-driven pattern of Qatari discourses during the uprisings can be traced in specific cases. In Egyptian uprisings, initially, Qatar was hesitant to take an official position; however, it supported the people through Al Jazeera's uninterrupted coverage of the demonstrations (Telci, 2017, p. 143). Shortly after revolutionaries won the victory and Mubarak stepped down in Egypt, Qatar was the first state to enounce its official support to democratic transition in favor of the will of the Egyptians. It is the declaration of Qatar's embracing of the Arab Spring (Başkan, 2016, p. 86). In Libya, Qatar attempted to canalize public attention to stop the bloody war. Initially, it established its discourse around the unacceptable brutal oppression of the regime, which was depicted by Shaikh Hamad as "a war declared against the protesters in which mercenaries are participating" and the requirement of intervention against the Gaddafi regime (Toumi, 2011). This position served to boost Qatari profile in a normative way both as a revisionist and modern state of the region in the eyes of the Western world (Ulrichsen, 2016), and advocated rightful and democratic claims of the popular will of Libyans as the defender of the new kind of Arabism by prioritizing "the Arab solutions to Arab problems" (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, p. 121). In this regard, the prime minister explained that "Qatar will participate in military action because we believe there must be Arab states undertaking this action because the situation [in Libya] is intolerable" (Qatar to take part in military action over Libya, 2011). So, in this respect, "the Libya crisis offered an opportunity for Qatar to align its support for the protection of human rights and democratic expression in a manner that resonated powerfully with the (Western-led) international community" (Ulrichsen, 2016, p. 123).

As a mirror image of Qatar and its foreign policy, Al Jazeera's overall themes intersect with the interest of the state of Qatar, including the backing of democratic Islamists, moderate approach toward extremists, and restricting the spread of Saudi Wahhabism by positioning itself as neutral. In this sense, during the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera Arabic presented revolutionary uprisings in Islamic terms by connecting democratic demands with religious contents with an ideological attitude. Its coverage of the Arab Spring is the manifestation of the Qatari stand underpinning the Arab revolutions and political Islam towards the upcoming change as a new form of pan-Arabism, which is merged

with political Islam and the former pan-Arab ideology against the oppressive, Westernized, secularized regimes. During the uprisings, Al Jazeera not only functioned as a news channel informing the people but also involved and canalized the course of events under a specific discourse of Islamized pan-Arabism on the side of revolutionaries by encouraging revolts across the region (Cherribi, 2017, pp. 43-76).

In Tunisia, Al Jazeera located itself as a voice of the people against the oppression of the Ben Ali regime by giving a voice to the revolutionary on the international scene. Despite the government pressures and censorship, it managed to convey various ingredients coming from the protesters, which paved the way for the successful revolution. Furthermore, although the majority of revolutionaries did not use Islamist references during their protests, after Ben Ali stepped down, Al Jazeera's coverage was deliberately dominated by religious focus with certain Islamic connotations and the return of Rached Ghannouchi was presented in an Islamizing tone. This tendency is the indicator of Al Jazeera's ideologically-driven involvement in the Arab Spring to shape the events under its Islamist pan-Arabic agenda (Cherribi, 2017, pp. 77-103). In a nutshell, Cherribi (2017) argues that "Al Jazeera's coverage of the Tunisian revolution was itself a major news story. It had a significant impact on the direction, the energy, and the actions of people throughout the course of the revolution" (p. 98).

Similarly, Al Jazeera was the prominent facilitator and promoter of the Egyptian revolution and post-revolution process in favor of Islamists. It was directly involved in the events by injecting Islamist essence through al-Qaradawi, who is the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned star of Al Jazeera and he has played an essential role in the Islamist pan-Arabism of the channel, and his fatwa during the demonstrations and democratic transition time. Religious-centered coverage of the event was repeated, as in Tunisia, around the voice of al-Qaradawi and the revolution was absorbed under the particular revolutionary narrative of Al Jazeera. So, by establishing a symbolic world around specific themes and words such as 'oppression' and 'Friday's rage', Al Jazeera added the revolutionary and mythical spirit to the Arab Spring. It framed the Arab Spring around the people's heroism and religiosity (Cherribi, 2017). In that line, Al Jazeera bolstered and ideologically advocated the same coverage promoting Islamist in most of the Arab Spring-affected countries.

Even if these discourses of Qatar, to some degree, explain the ideologically-driven stance of Qatar on the Arab Spring. Ideological explanations are not enough to grasp Qatar's unusual foreign policy as a small state during the Arab Spring. In fact, there is a broader elucidation for Qatar's position covering the ideological one. As other states, Qatar's policy was driven by the pursuit of power by capitalizing its long-term investments and accumulations carved by well-calculated strategies. So, as it will be illustrated, this interest-based opportunism of Qatar in the time of regional crisis can be detected in the actions of the Qatari state on the ground. Otherwise, without a real stake, why did a tiny state that is neither democratic as it promoted nor Islamist in an ideological sense as Muslim Brotherhood dare to promote a region-wide ideological project?

### **2.3.2. Interest-Based Opportunistic Stance**

In the post-2011 era, with the effects of the Arab Spring, the region has witnessed the rise of influence of the Gulf states across the region. This process is the continuation of the changing balance of power in favor of the Gulf states from the traditional powers in the Middle East. In this regard, the falling regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and the collapsed state of Syria have created a power vacuum in the region. In addition to this, the right-sizing efforts of the US downsizing its traditional commitments and its confused reactions to the Arab Spring have contributed to this power vacuum (Lynch, 2016, pp. 33-36). So, under this condition of the power vacuum and regional transition moment, Qatar perceived the upcoming revolts as an opportunity rather than a threat to use the events as leverage for enhancing its regional status and influence throughout the region. In this context, opportunism and pragmatism are the key terms to grasp Qatari reaction to the Arab Spring instead of ideological commitments. As Werner Levi (1970) argues that there is an interaction between ideology and interest. But ideologies have a secondary role in states' foreign policies. In this sense, they operate to justify states' actions and policies determined around interests. In this context, Qatar instrumentalized its aforementioned ideological discourse to legitimize and justify its interest-driven opportunistic actions.

### **2.3.2.1. Why Did Qatar See the Arab Spring as an Opportunity?**

As Bernard Haykel (2013a) and David B. Roberts (2012) emphasize, pragmatism is one of the foundation stones of Qatar's foreign policy to ensure security as a small state in unstable geography. So, rather than ideological motivations, reactionary pragmatism adopted by Qatari elites guides the foreign policy. Lina Khatib (2013) underscores this feature as well. According to her, Qatar's foreign policy is substantially affected by political trends and, instead of a long-term solid grand strategy, it is iterative and reactive to the changing regional trends. In this vein, she explains Qatar's reaction to the Arab Spring as the manifestation of its risky but balanced political pragmatism under the changing regional dynamics (pp. 429-431). From a similar standpoint, Ana Echagüe (2015) characterizes Qatar's policies on the Arab Spring as opportunistic siding with particular revolutionaries rather than ideological commitment and according to her, "the underlying logic of Qatari behavior has been to influence the direction of the transition in favour of the faction it supported and shift the balance of power in the region" (p. 73).

Kamrava (2013) notes that "(s)tate behavior is conditioned by the opportunities and challenges it faces, both internally and from the outside" (p. 26). In this line of reasoning, "Qatar is a country in search of a regional role, and the Arab Spring has presented the perfect opportunity to catapult it into a more prominent position" (Haykel, 2013b, p. 2). Since the prior economically fueled opportunist, pragmatic, and strategic policy formulation of the state of Qatar has made it possible to exploit the power vacuum in an opportunistic way to consolidate and enhance its position in the region (Guzansky, 2015b, p. 74). Hence, in this context, Qatar was well-positioned to see the Arab Spring as an opportunity to increase its power and status both from internal and external perspectives. This has been enabled by four interrelated factors that also distinguish Qatar from its neighbors, as Mehran Kamrava (2013) summarizes. The first one is related to the structure of the region. The decline of old powers has created an opportunity for Qatar to pursue its own agenda with the willingness of state leaders under the US protection. The second factor is the presence of autonomous, innovative, and coherent leadership in their politics in the domestic and international arena. The third is Qatar's social cohesion without domestic fragmentation. As an underpinning factor to the others, the last one is the abundance of financial resources

with a very small population (pp. 41-44). In addition to these comparative advantages, a coherent and small circle of decision making without institutional and domestic constraints, more freedom of action coming from fewer vested interest relative to the bigger states, and the Arab Spring's vision aligned with the Qatari state-branding, all of these, have facilitated Qatar's rapid change and adaptation in its foreign policy on the new circumstances in the post-2011 period (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, p. 110).

Making itself different from its neighbors is an important pillar of Qatar's foreign policy serving to feed national distinctiveness inside as a nation-building project and to distinguish Qatari identity within the region and GCC, particularly vis-à-vis long-troubled patron Saudi Arabia. Qatar's approaches to Wahhabism in a moderate way as distinct from Saudi Arabia and the MB are the indicators of Qatari seeking to escape from Saudi domination by making itself different (Mansour, 2016; Hammond, 2014; Roberts, 2012). Thereby, at one point, the state-branding, hedging, and mediation efforts serve for this end and the Arab Spring was also a watershed for the realization of this goal.

As a regional crisis, for Qatar, the Arab Spring was the exploitable chance to realize its geopolitical purposes by wielding its conducive conditions. In this regard, what Qatar utilized that is practical geopolitical reasoning, which aims at dealing with and covering crises the existing tools and values, in order to bolster the uprisings across the region in favor of the democratic change. Therefore, to enhance its regional position and influence, Qatar wielded what it had in terms of economic, diplomatic, media, and soft-power means to legitimize its position during the uprisings (Pala & Aras, 2015).

The Arab Spring and its initial direction of travel were also compatible with the Qatari prior foreign policy trends and its grand narrative shaped around divergent soft power and state-branding initiatives to appeal to the western world's attention to the innovative and liberal-oriented side of Qatar as a regional power. Therefore, as a leading actor, Qatar saw the unfolding events to operationalize this narrative by supporting democratic transition processes across the region (Krieg, 2019a, p. 98).

In its foreign policy, Qatar has deployed different forms of power for its political objectives at multilevel from domestic to regional and international, which has moved Qatar from just soft and hard power to a unique power combination. In its simplest form, soft power aims at achieving goals and shaping the preferences through attraction instead of coercion and hard power tools (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-7). In this vein, there are four pillars of Qatari soft power backing its foreign policy. It lies in investments in the cultural realm from media to sport, humanitarian aid and educational venture in the social realm, natural resources exports and foreign investments in the economic realm, and being friendly with everyone as a mediator in the political realm (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Qatar is a new dynamic and prominent actor in regional and global politics by acting as a middle power. By hedging its relations with various states and state-branding initiatives, Qatar has built its reputation and prestige to the rest of the world, which is the result of its ability to utilize distinct tools of power to fulfill its strategic ends at multiple levels. This ability of Qatar, using different tools at different levels for policy purposes, is defined as ‘nested power’ (Al Horr, et al., 2016, pp. 347-365). In this context, nested power is defined as “the use of multiple tools and means, at all levels, and harnessing them to multi-dimensional purposes of branding, positioning, attracting, and hedging” (Al Horr, et al., 2016, p. 354). Education investments inside, economic investments throughout the world, media investments embodied in the case of Al Jazeera, world-class museums and sport organizations, leading presence in the energy sector, mediation initiatives, humanitarian aid, all of these, constitute the nested power tools of Qatar interacting at the national, regional, and international levels to heighten credibility, security, and influence of Qatar (Al Horr, et al., 2016, pp. 354-363).

In a similar vein to nested power conceptualization, Kamrava (2017) elucidates Qatar’s outsized role in a globalized world in which the conception of power has transformed beyond the size, territory, and hard power capabilities as a small state with the notion of ‘subtle power’. It includes coordinated relations between military protection and security, global branding, hedging, proactive diplomacy, and international investments under the well-adjusted policy and focused leadership, which embodies in the Qatari case. In this sense, subtle power defined by Kamrava (2017) as

the ability to exert influence from behind the scenes. It revolves around the ability to influence outcomes to one's advantage through a combination of bringing resources to bear, enjoying international prestige derived from and commensurate with norm entrepreneurship, and being positioned in a such a way as to manipulate circumstances and the weakness of others to one's advantage (...) it involves additional elements such as prestige and reputation, proactive efforts at agenda setting, and creating interest maximizing opportunities or capitalizing on opportunities as they emerge (pp. 112-113).

So, this accumulated power defined in different terms nested or subtle power, the prior foreign policy strategies, and the structural factors as power vacuum and the regional crisis has enabled Qatar to adopt a distinctive foreign policy and capitalize the Arab Spring as an opportunity in its pursuit of power.

In general, the Qatari opportunism aims at several political ends. For Qatar, the Arab Spring provided an opportunity to differentiate itself from authoritarian counterparts in the eyes of the international society, to locate itself between the West and the Middle East as a dynamic actor that has good relations with the divergent actors (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, pp. 110-114), to exploit its well-entrenched relations with the non-state and Islamist actors that were gaining the power in the newly forming governments across the region (Kamrava, 2018c, p. 116), and to create a new network of alliances with the new revolutionary states to secure itself by balancing its relations with Saudi Arabia (Davidson, 2019, p. 87). In this vein, the opportunity-driven high-profile foreign policy of Qatar in favor of the Arab Spring has aimed at securing Qatar by capitalizing the change as the leading figure of the unfolding new regional order, which was on the way of democracy aligned with the western world. Therefore, in this profound regional transformation process with high risks and opportunities,

the Qatari Emir tried to maintain the regime survival by harmonizing its aforementioned geo-political and domestic considerations with emerging regional order in the Middle East through democratic and humanitarian discourse in its foreign policy (Yetim, 2014, p. 397).

#### **2.3.2.2. Manifestations of the Qatari Opportunism**

In this section, the opportunism of the Qatari state will be detected at the operational level by tracing its actions during the Arab Spring. First of all, the changing attitudes

and level of involvement towards the same-rooted uprisings across the region will be examined in order to indicate how the interest of the Qatari state affected its policy responses. Secondly, by falsifying the ideological accounts, Qatar's alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists will be elucidated around in its pragmatic nature.

#### **2.3.2.2.1. Selective Stance**

In place of developing a monolithic stance on region-wide revolts, as required in ideological explanation, Qatar, to some extent, acted by overseeing the possible threats to its security and geopolitical interest, which culminated in the adoption of selective position calculated around geographic distance, relational considerations in the GCC mantle, and threat perceptions. In Libya, far away from its borders without direct threat, Qatar took an aggressive position and directly engaged in the overthrowing of the internationally isolated Qaddafi regime in a coordinated way with Saudi Arabia and other Western powers and post-Qaddafi epoch in Libya. In the same direction, the Syrian inference of Qataris was compatible with the Saudis political ends to break the Iranian influence; nevertheless, they competitively picked different branches to support the opposition forces in accordance with their different self-interests. But, although the turmoil in Libya and Syria did not pose a direct threat to the security of Qatar, which provided the room for maneuver to the Qatari elites, Qatari involvement in these countries caused an indirect threat to Qatari security posed by Iran and Saudi Arabia in return for its policies (Nuruzzaman, 2015, pp. 230-231). So, even if it backfired later, at first, for Qatar, it was easy to pursuit of power to exploit the changing structural dynamics in Syria, Libya, and with lesser engagement in Tunisia. On the other hand, in Bahrain and Yemen, Qatar's selective involvement around geopolitical considerations manifested itself. Given the geographic proximity and Saudi Arabia's hegemony in the Gulf politics, the uprising in these countries directly fell within the Saudi's sphere of interest. To prevent any domino effect situation in the monarchies of the GCC, Saudi Arabia spearheaded the suppression of the uprisings in Bahrain and the chaotic conditions in Yemen. In this regard, the solid stance of Saudi Arabia and the presence of the possibility of direct threats to Qatari security have led Qatar to act under the GCC framework by politically supporting and militarily contributing to the deployment of the GCC troops in Bahrain and Yemen (Başkan, 2016, pp. 89-92).

Contradictory to its overall revolutionary position, under the GCC mantle, Qatar also contributed the aid packages of the GCC to support Jordan and Morocco with \$10 billion; and Bahrain and Oman with \$20 billion development assistance in 2011. Under the Saudi Arabia-led counter-revolutionary efforts, these aids aimed to prevent the upcoming wave of Arab Spring by consolidating their monarchical stance (Isaac, 2014, pp. 415-419).

Furthermore, a similar dilemma can be detected in Al Jazeera's dual standard coverage in Bahrain and Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia. Whereas it framed the uprisings as pro-democratic revolutions by taking a sharp and encouraging position with revolutionaries and ordinary people, it covered the protests in Bahrain in a sectarian discourse without referring to democratic demands and human rights violations; and giving a voice to the demonstrators. This is an indicator of how Al Jazeera functioned and was instrumentalized as a tool of Qatar's foreign policy in a selective way (Abdul-Nabi, 2017, pp. 7-16; Nuruzzaman, 2015, p. 7; Khatib, 2013, p. 428).

All in all, what Qatar did is that it selectively determined its policy response to the Arab Spring. It played its role in a proactive and interventionist way to align with the direction of change and to increase its political status in the new forming regimes in countries that do not fall under the GCC order and directly threaten Qatar's security. On the other hand, in countries located in the Gulf, Qatar followed the overall political approach of the GCC-led by Saudi Arabia by taking a less interventionist and proactive position. These divergent reactions underpin our argument; that is, Qatar attempted to benefit from regional circumstances in an opportunist and pragmatic way as an interest maximizer rather than the ideologically-driven monolithic advocator of the Arab Spring.

#### **2.3.2.2..2. Not Ideological Alignment But a Marriage of Convenience or Picking the Winners**

The revolutions against the long-standing former regimes and the democratic transition process have brought about a historic occasion for the MB in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, where the old leaders suppressed the Islamist oppositions over long periods. Given that reason, in the first phase of the Arab Spring, these groups returned

from the shadows as key and influential political actors for filling the authority vacuum as an organized power across the region (Pargeter, 2016). So, what Qatar did is that it invested this rising power in the new regional power configuration, which is not an ideological alliance, but a marriage of convenience resting on pragmatic calculations and long-established relations between the MB and Qatari state.

As noted by Davidson (2013), “as a double-edged sword, religion/Islam has been considered both a threat and an opportunity for the Gulf monarchies” (p. 72). On the one hand, it is a source of legitimacy and identity as a cornerstone of the nation-building process in these young states, on the other hand, it is a challenge that can politically mobilize the people by delegitimizing the present status-quo. Given that precision, these countries’ relations with Islamist actors have been shaped by political fear and pragmatism. In Qatar’s situation, pragmatism outweighs the fear.

Economic activities that assist the needs of people and participatory political systems are the key characteristics of the mobilization of the Muslim Brotherhood in the relatively poor countries of the Middle East. However, the lack of a participatory political process and a strong welfare system provided by the state, thanks to the exploitation of natural resources create a unique condition in super-rentier states such as Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. Therefore, the idea of political Islam and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood have proceeded differently from the rest of the region. Courtney Jean Freer describes this development as rentier Islamism in which the Islamist groups operate in an informal and un-institutionalized way to enhance their political and social capital. So, in this sense, the absence of a need for social welfare support by civil society and the electoral political system constitute the main features of rentier Islamism (Freer, 2018, pp. 1-27).

As Jean Freer (2018) elaborates, because they have different domestic structures, the Ikhwan has taken distinct directions in Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. In the case of Qatar, the story of Brotherhood starts with the arrival of Egyptian Brotherhood associates escaping from Nasser’s crackdown in the mid-1950. They mostly worked in the underdeveloped education sector of Qatar, which was an opportunity for Qataris to exploit the intellectual accumulation of these people and establish their education system. Then, Qataris, who were educated in Egyptian universities, became influential

in creating an indigenous organization in Qatar. But, this stage ended in 1999 with the self-dissolution of the organization. In a highly personalized political and rentier environment of Qatar, the Qatari Brotherhood could not take root in Qatari ground. Nevertheless, after 1999, their activities informally have been concentrated on just social policies and influence in a coordinated way with the Qatari leadership. So, relations between Qatar and the Ikhwan rest on mutual benefit rather than pure ideological commitment. At the initial phase, Qatar has provided a secure foothold for the Brotherhood expatriates, even, to maintain this condition, it dissolved itself (pp. 55-96).

The Brotherhood has also benefitted from the facilities offered by the Qatari elites. Al Jazeera has functioned as a diffusion platform of the group's ideas across the region. Hence, as it is pointed out, "Al Jazeera turned out to be Qatar's most valuable gift to the Brotherhood" (Başkan, 2016, p. 59). In return, Qatar has pragmatically taken advantage of the Brotherhood's networks and expertise in different forms by keeping "the Brotherhood activities in the country in check and maintains its ideological expansion outward-oriented" (Khlebnikov, 2015, p. 23). As an outcome of cultivated relations with the Ikhwan, it has improved its education system and political legitimacy inside and international reputation and regional status outside. It enables to put a small country at the center of key regional issues, and negotiation tables as a neutral actor have profound relations with wide-range groups. Furthermore, as a part of seeking independence, hosting the Brotherhood has also functioned as an escape channel from Saudi Arabia's political and Wahhabi clerics sphere of influence (Roberts D. , 2014).

David Roberts (2019) clearly summarizes this nature of relations between Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhoods. He argues that "contrary to claims that Qatari leaders are actively pursuing an explicitly Islamist agenda, the most persuasive explanation for Qatar's Islamist links stems from a combination of convenience, pragmatism, and sheer opportunism" (p. 2). He supports his thesis around four arguments. First, there is no strong Islamist establishment in Qatar that would affect the political sphere, as in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, instead of working alone, it coordinates its ties with Islamist groups with other international partners; for instance, Qatar has developed close relations with Hamas and the Taliban under the US's consent. On the other hand, there is no enough Islamist ground inside of the country so as to fuel ideologically-driven

Islamist foreign policy. Lastly, Qatar pragmatically wanted to build good relations with the new rising powers by betting on the revolutionary change in the region rather than Islamist impulse (Roberts D. B., 2019, pp. 6-8). The synchronous ties with opposite-inclined actors, such as Iran, Israel, the US, and Islamist groups, is also proof of pragmatic position and ideological resilience of Qatar beyond ideological commitment (Freer, 2018, p. 125).

To sum up, as distinct from neighbors, Qatar has cultivated peculiar relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists actors as a part of its hedging strategy (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 75-79). Because of domestic strength fed by rentier structure and relative homogeneity, Qatar sees the Brotherhood as leverage in a more pragmatic way, rather than a source of the ideological threat, as other Gulf states see (Khlebnikov, 2015, pp. 19-23). In this regard, the Brotherhood has become one of the prominent components of the security-oriented and interest-driven Qatari foreign policy, which is organized around the idea of regime security. In this vein, during the Arab Spring, the deep ties have been instrumentalized by the Qatari elites as a component of foreign policy objectives, directing the uprisings and building favorable relations with new rising powers, in favor of the unfolding region-wide change. Support for the Muslim Brotherhood has arisen from the fact that Qatar's decision-making process is highly-centralized; therefore, the support is the reflection of suitable choices in the short-term, instead of well-calculated strategy, on the one hand, the Qataris have pragmatically seen the importance of Islam and the Brotherhood's capacity and regional influence (Freer, 2018, pp. 122-124). So, as Ulrichen (2014) stresses, Qatar's approach to the Brotherhood characterized as "picking the winners". Due to the organization's ability and developed roots, political Islamists raised to the power in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Qatar capitalized this new reality by leveraging its influence through personal connections with exiles in Doha and institutional impact in the Brotherhood governments (p. 135).

So, what Qatar did is that it has encouraged and promoted the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Libya, Egypt, and, to some degree, Yemen, as it saw the group as the possible ascending power in the transition course of the region. This alliance also enabled Qatar to harvest its long-term investments as political power and to compensate its smallness

and deficiencies by using the Brotherhood's extensive networks and human resources for capitalizing the changing balance of power in the region (Weinberg, 2014).

### **2.3.2.2..3. Arming Extremist Groups and Proxy Politics**

In terms of understanding policy drivers of Qatar's new interventionist politics, Libya is the best case to examine Qatari actions during the Arab Spring. In Libya, as distinct from the previous case, Qatar embraced all aspects of the wave of uprisings and bolstered the revolutionaries by putting all its existing resources against the Qaddafi regime. In the first phase, Qatar's actions were, firstly, motivated by its role conception and status-seeking as a continuation of its soft-power and state-branding oriented foreign policy to appeal to the international community as a new dynamic power of the Middle East. Secondly, after the successful Tunisia and Egypt revolutions, Qatar saw the change in the future of the region as an unavoidable condition. It rapidly adopted itself in that course thanks to its comparative advantages of Qatari state (Khatib, 2013, pp. 421-422). In this context, at the operational level, "Qatar's interests in Libya were projected by personal connections, soft power, and awareness that the campaign offered a marketing of the Qatari 'brand'" (Ulrichsen, 2016, p. 124).

For this purpose, Qatar played a leading role on the ground, firstly, to topple Qaddafi, then, to promote the state-building phase in the post-revolution era. This role of Qatari state summarized by the Qatari chief of staff:

"We were among them and the numbers of Qataris on the ground were hundreds in every region. Training and communications had been in Qatari hands. Qatar (...) supervised the rebels' plans because they are civilians and did not have enough military experience (...) We acted as the link between the rebels and Nato forces" (Black, 2011)

As the first Arab state to recognize the National Transitional Council (NTC), Qatar diplomatically advocated military intervention in Libya against the Gaddafi regime on the regional and international fronts by taking advantage of its chairmanship in the Arab League. Consequently, as Barakat addresses, by bridging between the Western world and the Arab public, "the Qatari authorities provided vital legitimacy to NATO coalition forces in Libya" (Barakat, 2012, p. 24).

In the field, Qatar's military and financial supports facilitated the organization of revolutionary triumph in Libya. The Qatar-based Libya TV was the voice of the revolt. The Al Jazeera's coverage gave momentum to the process (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, p. 125). To financially back up the rebels, Qatar also undertook the responsibility to take and sell Libya's oil (Doherty, 2011) and bought a 49% of Libya's Bank of Commerce and Development (Ulrichsen K. C., 2014a, p. 89). However, more effectively on the ground, besides Qatari Mirage fighters' involvement in the NATO operation, Qatar also armed and trained the insurgents. It provided approximately 20.000 tons of weapons, as it is claimed, directly to the particular Islamist networks as Ali al-Salabi by excluding the formal channels (Dagher, Levinson, & Coker, 2011). Yet, thereafter, these weapons spread from Libya across the region and moved to the hands of radical Islamists in Syria and branches of Al Qaeda in Mali across the region due to the lack of any strategic planning (Risen, Mazzetti, & Schmidt, 2012).

As it is quoted by David Roberts (2017a),

Extensive interviews in Doha suggest that there is not a hint of evidence that the Qatari elite conducted anything approaching a rigorous risk assessment or any other kind of systematic interrogation of the idea once the emir had decided on the course of action (p. 560).

Therefore, in short-term, rather than well-calculated strategy, Qatar mobilized what it had by betting its interest in the same line with the course of the Arab Spring as a pioneering actor to strongly position itself in the new power configuration of the regional system. To this end, whether it is radical extremist or moderate Islamists, it supported every useful apparatus in the field. In general, Qatari elites counted on the MB groups and political expatriates in Qatar because of strong personal connections. Therefore, Qatar's initial support for the Islamist groups and its choice in its proxies stemmed from the availability of present tools for exploiting the regional power vacuum and shaping the direction of events. In favor of its interest, it saw the exile groups and individuals in Qatar as leverage in the political transformation processes in their countries (Lynch, 2016, p. 83). Therefore, through the MB and specific personal connections, Qatar pragmatically capitalized its long-term relations with these groups in many countries. Abdulhakim Belhadj, leader Tripoli Military Council and Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Ali al-Sallabi, prominent cleric of Libya and has similar ideas regarding Islam with the MB, but whether he is part of the group or an

independent actor is not totally clear (Pargeter, 2016, p. 130), and Fawzi Abu Katif, commander of 17 February Brigade in Benghazi, was the key connection of Qatar in Libya. And to finance these people, by August 2012, it spent nearly \$2 billion to shape the new Libya (Weinberg, 2014, pp. 67-68). Lina Khatib (2013) accounts for this Qatari backing of Islamists as a group or individuals in Libya around three points. It rests on long-term cultivated ties with diverse Islamist groups and individuals who have the ability to play a central role in the political future of the country. Secondly, Qatar sees these groups and their extensive networks as an asset in other countries such as Syria. Finally, via Islamists, Qatar intends to develop political influence by capitalizing its relations in the future orientation of the region in which Islamists would be possible powers in democratic transition periods (pp. 424-425).

As in Libya, Qatar sought to arm and finance the most useful groups for its ends in Syria. Qatar spent approximately \$3 billion arming an array of opposition groups in Syria from 2011 to 2013 (Khalaf & Smith, 2013). It distributed arms and cash without any strategy just as candy (Risen, Mazzetti, & Schmidt, 2012). Qatar also formed its jihadist proxies, namely al-Qaeda-bonded Jabhat a-Nusra, without intentionally mentioning about al-Qaeda ties of this group in its coverage by Al Jazeera (Abdul-Nabi, 2017, pp. 12-13), and Ahrar al-Sham (Roberts D. , 2017a, p. 547); and fundraisers for these sort of groups actively worked in Qatar to organize the war in Syria (Dickinson, 2014; Davidson C. , 2016). These acts of Qatar in Syria also were instigated by a regional power struggle within the Sunni-block. To operate outside of the Saudi sphere of influence in pursuit of independent foreign policy, Qatar canalized its resources to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian National Council (SNC) while Saudi Arabia first supported a secular then Salafi groups in Syria in a competitive way by dividing the anti-Assad block (Khatib, 2014, pp. 7-11).

#### **2.3.2.2.4. Geo-Economics: Using Economy as a Leverage**

Due to its central geopolitical position, size, history, and intellectual accumulation influencing the whole region, Egypt is one of the most influential and prominent countries of the region. It has the power to shape regional trends and struggles as during the Arab Cold War in which it led the Arab nationalism throughout the region (Gause III F. G., 2014, pp. 3-4). In this context, Egypt had strategic value as the symbol

of the combination of democracy and political Islam representing the new regional blueprint. Therefore, as March Lync (2016) claims, “(t)he overthrow of Mubarak and the rise of Muslim Brotherhood gave Qatar and unprecedented opportunity to incorporate Egypt into its regional coalition at the expense of Saudi Arabia and the UAE” (p. 94). For this goal, Qatar’s economic, diplomatic, and political power mobilized for the success of Morsi’s power in Egypt. In this regard, diplomatically, Qatar’s role as a bridge between the West and the new powers of the region became embodied in Egypt. It acted as an interlocutor between the MB and the US to find common ground in the new conditions by wielding its leverage on both sides to legitimize the Morsi government (Khatib, 2014, pp. 5-6). As the biggest funder of Morsi, Qatar pledged to back up the troubled economy of Egypt financially. It signed several agreements in different sectors to stimulate economic development and announced an \$18 billion investment planning in five years. In addition to this, Qatar yielded \$3 billion low-interest credit (Telci, 2017, pp. 145-146). Likewise, in Tunisia, Qatar also promoted the Islamist Ennahda party. It invested \$2 billion to Tunisia’s oil refinery project. Besides, Qatar provided financial support to the Tunisian central bank (Ulrichsen, 2014b, pp. 14-15). As already mentioned, Qatar also took bold economic steps in Libya to support the revolution and transition process in particular around its proxies.

Making sense of these ambitious and extraordinary economic moves of Qatar as a small state, the term of geo-economics must be used in this case since they cannot be clarified in pure rationalist economic logic. In simple form, geo-economics is defined as “the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results” (Blackwill & Harris, 2016, p. 20). In this regard, as it is underscored, one of the essential dynamics of Qatar’s foreign policy is its economic power enabling its international investments that are planned in a dynamic context of foreign policy considering military security, hedging, and branding together. Regional and global investments of Qatar are good examples of Qatari geo-economic (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 97-99). Therefore, in the post-2011 period, economic activism of Qatar must be evaluated in parallel with the aforementioned overall political goals, Qatar intended to build an alliance with the new regimes to form its regional alliance networks in the new regional order, to exert leverage on the transition process to increase its stakes and political influence, and as Abu Sulaib (2017) stresses,

to challenge Saudi Arabia's domination in pursuit of independent foreign policy, especially in the case of Egypt (pp. 38-39).

#### **2.3.2.2..5. Al Jazeera: a Political Tool in an Ambitious Strategy**

Internet, social media, and satellite televisions have played a crucial role in the Arab revolutions and they have empowered the people against the regimes by spilling the revolutionary spirit across the region under the eyes of international society. Given this facilitator function, particularly without Al Jazeera, it is hard to imagine that the Arab Spring's initial success could be performed (Lynch, 2015, pp. 90-93). In this context, in a similar line with the change in Qatar's foreign policy and objectives during the Arab Spring, as Zainab Abdul-Nabi claims, Al Jazeera's role and policy shifted from public diplomacy tool to mostly a propaganda machine married with Qatar's interests. However, even before the Arab Spring, there was no consensus on the nature of relations between the Qatari state and Al Jazeera. But, in general, it is assessed that Al Jazeera functions as an extension of Qatar's foreign policy and bargaining leverage of Qatar to underpin Qatari state-branding, soft-power, and mediation efforts (Ulrichsen, 2014a, p. 50; Guzansky, 2015b, p. 68). In this regard, Tal Samuel Azran (2013) examines the Saudi and Qatari relations under the hybrid model in which a state-sponsored station works as a bargaining tool under the interest of the state in times of crisis. In this sense, he shows that there is an evident alignment between Al Jazeera's coverage of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's interest in times of tense relations.

A similar position has been internalized by Al Jazeera as "Qatar's geo-strategic media" (Hroub, 2014) in the Arab Spring, which can be traced in its aforementioned ideological and biased coverage of the Arab Spring and selective stance towards different countries. Aligned with Qatari policy objectives, Al Jazeera functioned as a securitizing actor during the uprisings by canalizing awareness of the public attention to specific points (Doğan, 2017, p. 33). Moreover, via incorrect, unverified and biased reports, news, and footages, Al Jazeera attempted to lead the Arab Spring process in favor of Qatar's policy, especially in Syria (Qassemi, 2012; Khatib, 2013, p. 428; Nuruzzaman, 2015, p. 232). As a result, all of them, are the manifestation of

instrumentalization of Al Jazeera within the orbit of Qatar's interests and goals as a useful and effective foreign policy tool.

#### **2.3.2.2..6. Re-adjustment**

Thanks to its ties with the region-wide network with the Brotherhoods, Qatar was on the winning side of history. In this vein, Qatar fairly well-positioned itself in the transition process of Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and more complexly Syria. This success was the consequence of Qatar's rapid bet on the embracement of the Arab Spring. But, this changing balance of power has triggered a counter-revolutionary continuum that has been firstly operationalized in Egypt then extended across the region as a blueprint to crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhoods under the Saudi and Emirates leadership (Lynch, 2016, pp. 102-148). Hence, in 2013, after the Sisi's coup in Egypt, under the counter-revolutionary wave, the regional geopolitics has severely changed against "the Qatari Spring" (Barakat, 2012) and the rise of the MB.

In Libya and Yemen, they simply failed at the ballot box. In Egypt, their winner-take-all governing style led to their downfall. In Tunisia, they were forced to resign by sustained public protests and coalition crises. The Qatar-backed Syrian rebels face repeated setbacks on the battlefield (Weinberg, 2014, pp. 73-74).

In this shifting zeitgeist from the revolutionary enthusiasm to counter-revolutionary status-quo-led oppressiveness, an unforeseen and uncommon power transition was placed in Qatar. In 2013, just before the coup in Egypt, Sheikh Hamad voluntarily retreated from the throne in favor of his son Tamim bin Hamad (Adly, 2012). This was the sign of change in Qatar's assertive revisionist foreign policy, in particular its Egypt policy (Davidson C. , 2016), in pragmatical adaptation of itself to the new regional trends by overseeing changing balance of power and other international and regional actors attitude to the Arab Spring. Just as Qatar calculated the structural power vacuum and other powers possible positions at the first phase of the uprisings; thereafter, it picked its side for capitalizing the breaking moment of the history. In the post-2013 period, Qatar has revised its foreign policy orientation around these changing circumstances.

Right after the ascending to power, Emir Tamim committed to some adjustments in its regional policies in a consequence of the pressures hailing from Saudi Arabia and the UAE due to the prior policy orientation bolstering the region-wide rise of the MB. According to the secret agreement, named as the Riyadh agreement and signed in 2013, under the new leadership, Qatar would leave to support the MB, interfere with other states' internal politics, and soften Al Jazeera's revolutionary coverages (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018, p. 620).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, given the leisurely actions of Qatar and divergent threat perceptions, the fissure in the GCC consensus deepened and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014 (Roberts D. , 2017a, p. 548). This was the manifestation of the huge divide between Qatar and other members' of the GCC and backlash to Qatar's policies during the revolts at the regional level; and the outcome of Qatar's strategic miscalculations which are pointed around three issues by Lina Khatib; contradictory and distinct policies with Saudi Arabia in Egypt and Syria, regional support for the MB, and assistances to jihadist networks jeopardizing the regional security. These led to international, regional, and domestic challenges for Qatar's foreign policy. Consequently, under these pressures, Qatar recalibrated its foreign policy around new calculations (Khatib, 2014). After the 2014 agreement that resolved the crisis, under the traditional line of the GCC politics, Qatar distanced itself from Iran and lowered its commitments with the MB by taking several concrete steps, significantly contributed to the operation in Yemen, and restrained its avid actions in Syria, Saudi Arabia took the responsibility of dissidents, and in Libya, the UAE acquired ground. Also, Al Jazeera halted its critical coverage in the gulf's monarchies. In general, under the GCC mantle, Qatar, to some extent, pragmatically downsized its ambitious and interventionist foreign policy as a result of external pressures (Kamrava, 2018c, pp. 119-120; Bianco & Stansfield, 2018, pp. 620-622).

This change indicates that political and military security is the foremost objective of Qatari foreign policy. Around interests shaped by these two lines, as a continuation of its traditional survival strategy, Qatar saw the upcoming wave as an opportunity and pragmatically initiated to take advantage of this shift to increase its regional penetration and power projection by allying itself with new regional actors and to

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<sup>1</sup> see also the agreement translated by CNN, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/07/10/translation.of.agreementsupdated.pdf>

widen its room for independent foreign policy seeking by countering Saudi hegemony. Hence, Qatar's attitude towards the Arab Spring is not ideological, but interest-based opportunism for which ideological elements have been instrumentalized as foreign policy tools such as Al Jazeera, ties with the Muslim Brotherhood.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

As it is explained, in the Arab Spring process, Qatar conducted an interventionist and assertive foreign policy in favor of regional transformation and revolutionaries in many countries. It acted in that way since Qatar saw the structural change as an opportunity to increase its power and influence in the region. At that point, its prior foreign policy was already consistent with the spirit of the Arab Spring. Given the tools of the Qatari state, it had the capacity to shape the event in the advantage of the state of Qatar. The Emir Hamad had the political will and vision to evaluate the status of Qatar as a regional power, which allowed pragmatic foreign policy conformance in the midst of the regional change. Domestic stability, wealth, and confidence inside also underpinned the Qatari opportunism. However, the most striking factor shaping Qatar's response is that its prior foreign policy orientation and strategies developed under Hamad's leadership such as strategic hedging, open-door policy, ties with Islamists, and mediator role. They have made possible the Qatari rise as a regional and influential power; and ability of flexible pragmatism according to the political trends.

In conclusion, Qatar eagerly attempted to capitalize on the change for its interest and power-driven objectives. To this end, it canalized its abovementioned foreign policy tools on the field. So, as it is claimed in this section, in this respect, the ideological discourse has been instrumentalized for the power-based interest of Qatar. Prior foreign policy orientation and stability inside have caused Qatar to see the Arab Spring as an opportunity to project its accumulated economic and diplomatic power to the political one. Therefore, rather than ideology, the main driver behind Qatar's response to the uprisings is opportunism and pragmatism to exploit the regional circumstances.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE UAE'S REACTION TO THE ARAB SPRING**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

As a small state in an insecure region, the UAE conducted a very unconventional and assertive foreign policy across the region beyond its power and status during the Arab Spring. The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate how the UAE reacted to the Arab Spring and why it reacted in that way. In this regard, this will be the first puzzle of this section to solve. Because what the UAE did is an extraordinary type of behavior for a small state. As the second puzzle, the UAE's main motivation behind its Arab Spring policy will be discussed whether it is the ideological or typical pursuit of power behavior?

In this chapter, the focus is on the UAE's foreign policy response to the Arab Spring. To grasp this, firstly, the UAE's general foreign policy dynamics and features will be introduced. Then, the Arab Spring's effect on this foreign policy and the triggered change by the Arab Spring will be explained. Finally, in the main part, the motivations and dynamics behind the UAE's reaction to the Arab Spring will be traced through causal mechanisms that enable us to make solid evidence-based inferences about causal relations and to grasp how a cause produces an outcome.

#### **3.2. Foreign Policy of the UAE**

##### **3.2.1. Foreign Policy Before the Arab Spring**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), founded in 1971 as an independent state, has transformed into a regionally and internationally prominent actor in a short period. It is the only federal state in the Middle East. The UAE consists of the seven emirates of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Al Fujairah, Dubai, Ras al Khaymah, Sharjah, and Umm al

Qaywayn. These emirates along with other small emirates such as Qatar were the separate political entities under the protection of the United Kingdom (UK) and its sub-imperial system that is called the Trucial States system of the Persian Gulf. After the withdrawal decision of the UK in 1968, the UAE was founded as a product of dynamic interactions and interests of tribal and other forces within the emirates. Federalism works as a protection mechanism that enables the survival of these tiny emirates located in a very strategic chokepoint of the Persian Gulf blessed with enormous oil and gas reserves and an autonomy enabler (Almezaini, 2012, pp. 28-32).

Today, “(t)he UAE is a major trade hub, an exporter of oil, a center of regional finance, and the beneficiary of a stable pegged currency to the US dollar” (Young, 2014, p. 36). It is the second-largest economy of the Middle East with \$ 382.6 billion GDP and \$68,600 GDP per capita in 2017 (The World Factbook, 2020). Oil sectors is the cornerstones of the UAE’s economy. According to U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), as one of the major oil producers, the UAE holds the seventh-largest oil reserves that are approximately equivalent to 6 % of the world oil reserves. The reserves of the country are concentrated in the hands of Abu Dhabi that possesses 96 % of the country’s oil reserves and production capacity. As the seventh-highest producer, in 2016, the UAE produced 3.5 bpd of petroleum and other liquids. It also has the seventh-largest proved natural gas reserves (United Arab Emirates, 2020). Despite this large economy, the UAE is a very small country in terms of population that is estimated in 2019 as 9.7 million; but, only 12 % of the population consists of the Emirati citizens. Another part is foreign workers (The World Factbook, 2020).

The foreign policy of the UAE is conducted in four circles: the Gulf, the Arab world, the Islamic world and the broader world, with a stronger focus in Arab affairs. Five essential domestic structural factors influence the Emiratis’ self-perception and capabilities through which the foreign policy agenda is established. These are (1) geographical determinants that include strategic importance of the Persian Gulf because of the wealthiest oil reserves of the world and the Strait of Hormuz as a critical vital point of the world trade; (2) population and social structure which are characterized by the small number and relative homogenous citizens; (3) economic capabilities stemming from immense natural resources; (4) military power that is featured by inabilities and insufficiency in volatile and competitive regional order; and

(5) political structure enabling robust autonomy in foreign policy formation to the ruler of the state in spite of its federal structure ( Al Mashat, 2008, pp. 459-464).

Besides these, external factors are crucial as well. Because chronic insecurity in the Gulf is deeply rooted and manifested itself in perpetual conflicts and wars: the Cold War, Arab-Israel Wars, Iranian Islamic Revolution, Iran-Iraq War, two Gulf Wars, and 9/11 (Kamrava, 2018c). This condition determines the foremost objective of foreign policy, namely, survival and regime security. In Almezaini's (2012) saying, "(t)he UAE is too valuable to be ignored, but too small to defend itself militarily" (p. 36). Hence, as a small state in an insecure order, these external factors have pushed the UAE to find a powerful security guarantor. Just as other Gulf states, the security ties between the UAE and the US constitute the main characteristic of the foreign policy. All of these are essential themes that canalize the foreign policy of the UAE in a specific way, as will be elucidated below.

Despite its federative structure in which the emirates have relative autonomy in their domestic realms, the foreign policy of the country, to a great extent, is determined by the president, namely, Abu Dhabi. In this regard, the power is concentrated around small circles of decision-making between the ruling elites of the emirates. Furthermore, when it comes to foreign policy, this circle narrows more in the hands of the president that is the leader of Abu Dhabi and the vice president that is the leader of Dubai. Therefore, the foreign policy of the state is dominated by the president ( Al Mashat, 2008, pp. 466-468). This became entrenched during the reign of Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan who is the charismatic founder of the UAE. His ideas, personal charisma, and agenda regarding the future and position of the UAE have determined the principles of the foreign policy. So, given the central position of Sheikh Zayed, in general, the foreign policy of the UAE can be divided into two areas: the Zayed era (1971-2004) and the Post-Zayed era (2004-) (Alzaabi, 2019; Almezaini, 2012). However, in our analysis, the Post-Zayed period is also classified under two categories: before and after the Arab Spring.

During Sheikh Zayed, the UAE's foreign policy was consistent with the survival and state formation of the newly founded state in a highly insecure environment. Around four attributes, Ulrichsen (2017a) explains foreign policy in this era. Most of them

have continued to guide the UAE's policies. Since the first day of its foundation, security has been the ultimate goal of the UAE to ensure its survival under hazardous circumstances and hostile neighbors such as Iran and Iraq. That is why the initial orientation of the foreign policy has intended to embed itself in regional and international politics by gaining acceptance through Arabism and Islamism dominated discourse and foreign aid. Hence, firstly, security strategies are the fundamental component of the Emirati's foreign policy. Secondly, Arabness and commitment to Palestine's cause are the other striking features. To this end, the UAE has provided significant aid programs not only to support Arab solidarity but also to enhance its status and profile by cementing and diversifying its ties with other powers as a responsible member of the Arab world thanks to its economic power. Therefore, foreign aid constitutes another pillar of the UAE's foreign policy. Lastly, diplomatic mediation initiatives and peaceful resolutions of disputes have been the main principle shaping the conduct of foreign policy (pp. 139-141).

In his investigation of this founding era for the Emirati's foreign policy, mainly, by focusing its foreign aid centralism, Khalid S. Almezaini (2012) provides a constructivist stance. According to him, constructivism was the prominent feature of the UAE's foreign policy that has ensured its survival as a small state in the Persian Gulf. The federal structure of the state, which is facilitated by historical and socio-political resemblances around tribal allegiances, also made possible this constructivist foreign policy. Another striking feature influencing the foreign policy is that the state formation process and consolidation within the Emirati was still on the process during the Zayed's reign. Hence, the rationale behind Zayed's foreign policy is to ensure the state's survival both by consolidating its status and image within the state and regional order by promoting ideological politics centered on Arabism and Islamism through foreign aid (pp. 21-44). In this regard, Abdul-Monem al-Mashat (2008) claims that constructive engagement of the UAE manifested in its compromises; diplomatic and peacefully resolution approach to the conflicts with its neighbors without escalating the tension; and delicate and well-calculated policies. These all have made possible its survival and provided a relatively stable environment to finish state formation and modernization processes in the domestic realm (p. 458).

On the other hand, because Sheikh Zayed controlled the whole direction and basics of foreign policy around his vision and political perception. Shaped by the emir's ideological preferences, in his period, foreign policy of the UAE is defined by Abdulkhaleq Abdulla (2012) as ““idealistic” in its orientation and essentially Arab world-centred.” In his conduct of foreign policy, support for Arabism and Islamism within the Arab countries was prioritized. Therefore, from cultural and identity aspects, firstly, Arabism and, then, Islamism had a significant effect on the UAE's foreign policy orientation. Nevertheless, in the post-2000 era, the direction of the UAE's foreign policy has shifted to a more pro-Western dominated way under the process of globalization and internationalization of the UAE (Almezaini, 2012, pp. 37-44).

In epitome, there are three elements of Zayed's vision with regard to the UAE foreign policy:

maintaining some kind of balance of power in the Gulf, so that no one state can dominate that local region; a desire for conciliation with regional neighbours when this will contribute to regional stability; and a willingness to conciliate with neighbours in its oil policy (Almezaini, 2012, p. 37).

In 2004, after the death of Sheikh Zayed, Sheikh Khalifa took the power. Under the new power configuration, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) and, ruler of Dubai, Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum (MBR) have become new blood in foreign policymaking (Alzaabi, 2019, pp. 145-146). However, up until 2011, there was any no significant change in foreign policy articulation and the harmony between foreign policy orientation and behavior was maintained ( Al Mashat, 2008, pp. 468-477). Bold and decisive undertakings of these two figures aimed to locate the UAE in the globalization era. For this purpose, they have initiated a major economic liberalization, industrial and infrastructural development processes that have paved the way for the Emirati's transformation from a regular small state to a newly assertive and emerging power of the international system. Under this agenda, the world has witnessed the rapid internationalization of the UAE's foreign policy as well. In particular with the new ascending powers, diplomatic and economic ties have been widened all over the world, from Africa, Asia, to Latin America (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, pp. 145-157).

Due to its smallness and limited capabilities that lie in the structural conditions of the country, diplomacy is the most valuable tool in the UAE foreign policy to survival and protection. Given the vast resources, the economy is the basis of this diplomatic power of the UAE. In this vein, the economy functions as a crucial foreign policy tool for the Emirates as leverage to make it a considerable actor in regional and international politics (Almezaini, 2012, p. 49). In this context, the exercise of soft power via foreign aid as the essential component of the foreign policy displays continuity in all periods (Alzaabi, 2019, p. 146). Seeking for security has been the primary driver behind the foreign policy and aid program of the UAE, for the main concern for the UAE is to enhance its security and survival. Besides this realistic approach, the cultural identity of the UAE, consisting of Islamism and Arabism, has played an essential role in aid allocation. In exercise of soft power, foreign aid is one of the central pillars of the foreign policy in the state. It has allocated nearly % 10 of its GDP to the Arab and Muslim countries as foreign aid. The UAE started its aid program for the purpose of firstly to contribute to Arab solidarity, to gain recognition and acceptance as a new regional state, which has been facilitated by the economic strength of the UAE, especially after the 1973 oil crises. So, through foreign aid, as an extension of its security and survival policy, the UAE has aimed to establish good relations with other Arab states, to gain recognition, influence, and prestige as a new regional state within the Arab system, and to consolidate pride and citizenship inside of the country as a nation-building project (Almezaini, 2012, pp. 101-115).

As one of the fundamental cornerstones of the UAE's foreign policy, the Emirati's survival and security have been guaranteed under the US's security umbrella. Together with the vulnerabilities of being a small state, both regional and international factors pushed the UAE to seek a security protector. External threats coming from close neighbors Iran and Iraq accelerated the need for protection of this newly founded small Gulf monarchy amid regional power struggles. Therefore, just a couple days before Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, the UAE requested military support of the US to deter Saddam's hostile acts and threats against the country. After the first Gulf war in 1991, the defence cooperation act formalized the security protection of the UAE by the US in 1994. After that, the US troops have located in the Al-Dhafra base and Jebel Ali has become the most visited port by the US warships. In the following continuum, with its strategic location, the UAE has been a critical foothold and reliable partner for the

US's regional foreign policy, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. What is more, as the only Arab state, the UAE has taken part in all of the international military campaigns of the US military, with one exception that is the Iraq invasion in 2003 in a broad spectrum from Kosova to Somalia since 1991 (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, pp. 141-150).

As the wealthiest emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai dominate the politics of the UAE. Both of them have different priorities in the economy and from time to time in foreign policy. Due to its lack of natural resources, Dubai has followed a different pathway from Abu Dhabi that has focused on energy-based economic development. Its focus has always been trade-centric so as to capitalize its strategic location. In the process, Dubai has become a significant hub for regional logistics and infrastructure as the leading re-export center connecting continents (Davidson C. , 2005, pp. 154-162). As a crucial re-export hub for international trades, in 2014, % 70 of the goods produced in China firstly arrived in Dubai, then spread to the world. Moreover, to attract international business circles and high-profile tourists, Dubai has started a comprehensive economic liberalization initiative. It has established investor-friendly free-zones and grandiose real estate projects. The objective behind these steps is to brand Dubai as the new financial and tourism center of the world under the economic diversification agenda (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, pp. 91-99). In addition to branding as a financial hub, the UAE has carved out its reputation in other niche areas as well. For example, Dubai-based Emirates and Abu Dhabi-based Etihad airlines are the flagship brands of the UAE in the international arena. Thanks to generous government supports and encouragements, these airlines have turned into global super-connector that bridges East and West (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, pp. 119-123).

To sum up, the UAE has gradually become a prominent actor in the international arena thanks to its financial power, geostrategic location, and natural resources. In process, as a new state, it firstly canalized its efforts to complete the state-building phase in domestic arena and to get acknowledgement from regional states as a legitimate and respectful actor. The subsequent era, especially after 2014, the UAE's attention has turned to the outside world. The internationalization of the Emirati's money, soft power, and foreign policy has boosted the image and status of the country in the eyes of the international theater. So, when the Arab Spring started to shake the region, the

UAE was a small but influential power that accumulated immense wealth and power from the oil hikes.

### **3.2.2. Foreign Policy in the Arab Spring**

In comparison to its neighbors in the Gulf and the Middle East, the UAE is the second least influenced state of the Arab Gulf States. Similar to Qatar, it has been relatively immune from the uprising and it was not exposed to any popular demonstration mostly because of its rentier structure and wealth economy in domestic politics. Nevertheless, there were a few demands for political reform. To this end, 133 prominent people signed a letter to make the legislative power of the Federal National Council (FNC) more substantial. Under the revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring, the government perceived this move as a threat to the countries stability and pushed it down (Abdulla, 2015, pp. 45-46). To sustain the citizens' loyalty, the federal government also performed the same rentier state reflex: buying political legitimacy. Amid the regional uprisings, it declared an additional \$ 2.7 billion aid package for the poorer northern emirates' infrastructure deficiencies and provided % 20 increase in welfare spending and huge salary increases close to 100% in the public sector (Davidson C. , 2013, p. 224). However, the UAE's responses to the Arab Spring outside of the country are more proactive and rigid.

The new circumstances in the Middle East caused by the uprising have been a profound impact on the UAE's foreign policy since 2011. To influence the ongoing change in the regional transition moment for its interests, "the UAE subsequently developed a hawkish and assertive approach to foreign and security policy" (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, p. 184). In this vein, the UAE has self-confidently conducted highly interventionist and assertive foreign policy overseeing its interests across the region (Abdulla, 2012). In general, the UAE acted as an influential power broker in Libya, Bahrain, Egypt, and Yemen by trying to play a pioneering role in the unfolding regional change by supporting the counter-revolutionary forces vis-à-vis revolutionaries (Kamrava, 2018c, p. 121). It provided immense financial, military, and diplomatic supports through different channels in these Arab Spring-affected countries to lead the wave of Arab Spring in coherence with its regional vision and national interests. More specifically, it participated in the Peninsula Shield Forces to suppress

the demonstrations in Bahrain; in NATO-led international military operation in Libya to overthrow Gaddafi regime and played a passionate role in the new political transformation process by mobilizing its military, diplomatic, and economic power; and took a strong position in Egypt to in favor of the Sisi regime against the revolutionaries and the MB by using all its economic and diplomatic means. With less intensity, the UAE became involved in the Syrian crisis as well. Yemen is another country that the UAE adopted decisive foreign policy behavior in a militaristic way (Guéraiche, 2019). So, what do all these acts mean? What kind of change in the overall foreign policy of the Emirati do they refer?

The abovementioned tenets and orientation of the UAE's foreign policy are not consistent with its conventional conducts. Therefore, it is claimed that a noteworthy change has marked in the UAE foreign policy stemming from the Arab Spring-led change since 2011. As mentioned, besides core tenets of realism, identity in the UAE's foreign policy was dominant before the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, because of the mushrooming of regional instability and threats, the UAE's foreign policy has headed for a more realist pathway under its core basis; state survival, self-help, and state sovereignty (Almezzaini K. , 2018, pp. 201-202).

First of all, it has left non-interventionism and adopted a very interventionist foreign policy in terms of economy, military, and political in the post-2011 period (Guéraiche, 2019, pp. 396-397; Almezzaini K. , 2018, pp. 191-192). Secondly, in addition to increases in wielding of soft power, enhancements in hard power capacity and use of military power, in pursuing of its interests, actively across the region constitute a striking shift in foreign policy with respect to the pre-2011 era. What is more, this military assertiveness has branded the UAE as the new rising military power of the region. It has developed independent and strong military capabilities (Ibish, 2017, pp. 1-3; Almezzaini K. , 2018, pp. 197-200). In return, it was branded by the US military circles as "Little Sparta" referring to its militarism and authoritarianism (Krieg, 2017). In the midst of the Arab Spring-led turmoil, the UAE used its military power; in Libya, it contributed to NATO-led international coalition by sending warplanes and special forces, in the international coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Yemen against the Houthis in 2015.

More independent conduct of foreign policy based on its self-interest marks another considerable change in the post-Arab Spring era under the harsh intensified self-help situation and the US's retrenchment. This can be traced in its more autonomous policy decision as in military intervention in Libya (2014) and Yemen (2015) without looking for the consent of the US (Ibish, 2017, pp. 1-14; Sons & Wiese, 2015, p. 5). Also, the risk diversification strategy of the UAE has been intensified more defensively and independently in its foreign policy articulation to minimize the security threats (Sherwood, 2017, p. 147).

Overall, as convincingly summarized in the words of Ulrichsen (2017a), "the UAE increasingly has become a contributor to, rather than merely a consumer of, regional security structures not only in the Gulf but also in the broader Middle East region" (p. 150).

### **3.3. Tracing the Driving Forces Behind the UAE's Foreign Policy on the Arab Spring**

This part aims to enlighten why the UAE reacted to the region-wide revolts in an unexpectedly aggressive and interventionist way supporting and encouraging the present status quo under the counter-revolutionary block of the Arab Spring. To put it differently, how the explained change in foreign policy of the Emirati can be grasped?

In this regard, I will attempt to answer the following. How can a small state's use of this kind of assertiveness and foreign policy activism be elucidated? Why and how did the UAE play this unique and outsizing role beyond its power by taking a counter-revolutionary position? What is the primary driver and dynamic behind the foreign policy orientation of the UAE? Is it based on ideological and normative considerations and threats or pragmatic and interest-based pursuit of power understanding the main impulse for the UAE's foreign policy response to the Arab Spring?

Robert Mason (2018) argues that increasing policy activism of the UAE in the regional context has been driven by two existential security threats; the growing presence and influence of Iran and political Islam (p. 97). Beyond just using its diplomatic and economic capacities traditionally, the UAE has started to conduct a highly

interventionist foreign policy by operationalizing its military means not only to refrain from the spillover impact of the Arab Spring but also to counter threats targeting its security. In this line of reasoning, Eman Ragab (2017) also stresses the same drives and the US-led power vacuum as factors that have caused the militarization of the UAE's foreign policy to fill the power vacuum to secure their interest and locate themselves in regional re-ordering (pp. 37-42).

The power vacuum produced by the fall of central regimes of the region and the US's reluctant and non-interventionist attitude towards the regional events has paved the way for the UAE's proactive and interventionist regional policy in the post-2011 period. It functioned as a double-edged sword for the Emirati. Firstly, it created a suitable environment in which regional power competition peaked, proxy wars intensified, violent and non-violent non-state actors mushroomed, and the MB raised its regional penetration at the top. These boosted the security concerns of the UAE. On the other hand, the power vacuum worked as a structural opportunity for the Emirati to increase its status as an influential regional power and its regional sphere of influence.

Between this dilemma, the US policy response to the uprisings and regional change is one of the prominent factors shaping the UAE's response as well. As the long-term ally and security guarantor for the Gulf states and regional status quo, the US, under the Obama presidency, reacted to the Arab Spring with mixed and hesitant mood. It emphasized non-interventionism; but, it also promoted democratic transition in the first phase. In this regard, Obama facilitated its long-term regional allies' fall as in example of the Mubarak regime in Egypt (Gerges, 2013, pp. 305-308). Within a broader global context, this policy implementation of the US is seen as an extension of its re-positioning efforts in return of changing the balance of power dynamics. So, as Khatib (2017) states "this isolationist mood, the loss of the strategic value of Gulf oil, and the US shift to Asia" have caused rifts between the US and the Gulf states amid regional turmoil (p. 109).

From Saudi Arabia and the UAE perspectives, the abandonment of strategic counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt by the US stimulated profound fear of the same destiny and eroded reliability of the US's security patronage in the era of regional

revolutionary change working against their regime security. This process also coincided with Obama's nuclear negotiations with Iran. It culminated in 2015 with the deal of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The normalization of Iran issue in regional politics and the US's decisive non-interventionism, even if the so-called red lines were overturned in Syria about chemical weapons, deepened the gulf monarchies' anxieties (Quilliam, 2020, pp. 95-102). Furthermore, in the new regional power configuration and the Arab Spring's alternative regional vision, the US's untrustworthy image alerted another fear of the elites of the UAE; that is, the Western powers' potential to "jump on the Islamistdemocrat bandwagon" (Davidson C. , 2019, p. 85).

Consequently, this position of the US and the collapse of the region's major powers pushed the UAE's to take more independent and proactive foreign policy by pursuing its self-interests in an intensified self-help situation in the Arab Spring.

The abovementioned changes and high-level of involvement with the regional crises have caused the rise of the UAE as one of the leading states of the Middle East. That is rooted in its calculations swinging between countering security threats and exploiting the regional power vacuum for the sake of its opportunist interests as regards the structural change caused by the Arab Spring. That is to say, the UAE took a counter-revolutionary and interventionist position against the Arab Spring because it saw the events and their impacts as a threat that has to be balanced and, at the same time, as an opportunity to strengthen its region-wide political power and project its vision about the regional order.

Thereby, identification and examination of these challenges and threats with their manifestations at the operational level give us a deep insight to determine the answers of our question: What are the main drivers and dynamics of the Emirati's foreign policy in the Arab Spring?

### **3.3.1. Counter-Revolutionary Rationale for the UAE**

As Maridi Nahas (1985) notes, revolutions are the powerhouse of the change in history. They shake the ground rules of societies and state-society relations by

injecting new ideas, norms, and powers into the existing system. The new powers and ideologies produced by revolutions trigger a new sort of struggle organized around revolutionary and counter-revolutionary blocks. In the seminal study of “state-system and revolutionary challenge”, Nahas (1985) examines the revolutions in Egypt and Iran; and their impacts on the regional state-system. Since its establishment after the WWI, the Middle East regional state-system has been shaken by constant systemic crises that challenged the status-quo by proposing alternative norms and governing mechanisms. In the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt-led pan-Arabism and its republican, secular-nationalist, and socialist discourse and, in the 1980s, Iran-led pan-Islamism were the two deep crises of the system. Both of them were expansionist, republican, and revolutionary; therefore, by offering alternative normative consensus, they undermined the legitimacy and established the foundation of the status quo resting on dynastic monarchies and Westphalian-style sovereignty. This triggered the regional struggle, in general lines, between defenders of the status-quo-led by monarchies and the revolutionaries. Similarly, Michael Barnett (1998) discusses the regional state-system around the interaction between Arab identity and sovereignty as a dialogue for regional order and narrates “Arab politics as a series of dialogues between Arab states regarding the desired regional order—the ongoing debate by Arab states about the norms of Arab politics and the relationship of those norms to their Arab identities” (p. VIII).

What is the common point here is that the struggles to define the norms, which are “collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity” (Jepperson, Wendt, & Katzenstein, 1996, p. 54) of the regional order have been the central fault line of the region since its formation. Because identities and norms; and states’ interests and policies reciprocally influence each other. Norms play a significant role in the formation of state interest and identity (Jepperson, Wendt, & Katzenstein, 1996). Hence, as it is emphasized within the Middle East (Barnett, 1998) and the Persian Gulf (Özev, 2010) context, the interactions of identities, norms, and state interests have determined the trends and features of the regional system. For example, the peak times of Arab nationalism, its desired norms for regional order assigned the broad battle lines between monarchies that defended sovereignty against Arab unity and concentrated on Islamism as a legitimacy source and republicans that defended the Arab cause. In the process, the interactions of identities, roles, and interests produced more

sovereignty-friendly Arab nationalism, which is a vital sign of how state identity and interest mutually constitute norms (Barnett, 1995).

The seeds of regional crises lie in the Middle East's peculiar conditions. Externally forced artificial state formation processes that do not fit with the natural boundaries of nations and states constitute the essential catalyzer for the conflict tendency of the region. This disrupted state-nation balance has made the states vulnerable against social movements. At this point, "pervasive irredentism", "suprastate identity", and "identity variance" make the Middle East's international relations unique. Irredentism mainly stems from the gap between territorial realities and ideal political imaginations fostered by shared features and identities. Pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism are the two historical forces of the transnational ideational powers. In the process, both profoundly and competitively influenced regional international relations by operating beyond the sovereign states. Besides, identity variance that exists on all levels turns the whole regional picture and politics into a more complex and multi-layered structure. Hence, this brings about the manipulation of these identities in their foreign policies as a tool to intervene in other states' domestic politics in a defensive and offensive sense. The incompatible porous borders with the desire and characteristics of the peoples of the region, meant that division and disconnection between the ideal one and the real one, contributed to this peculiar situation. This salience of transnational identities also fosters the intertwined nature of domestic and foreign realms (Hinnebusch, 2014c).

In this context, A. Enes Tuzgen (2019) rightly claims that the primary enabler of these systemic crises, including the Arab Spring, is the lack of normative consensus regarding the governing principles of the system. That is why the system is periodically challenged by rival alternative visions. The region's distinctive characteristics which are deep legitimacy problems, porous border, the strength of transnational identities, and blurred lines between domestic and foreign politics also facilitate and promote the emergence of the new alternative proposals addressing the grievances in the status quo. This process eventually evokes a systemic crisis in the form of a fight between revolutionary, having stakes in change, and status quo, having stakes in the existing system, powers (pp. 37-38).

After this general information, it is time to discuss the Arab Spring and the UAE's policy responses in this context. Tüzgen (2019) contextualizes the Arab Spring by adapting the studies of Nahas and Barnett to another revolutionary moment of the region. He takes the uprising as another round of the cycle of the regional systemic crises. This meant "a fight between defenders of the existing normative consensus and those who propose an alternative" (p. 5). Just as the prior revolutions that had their specific visions for the regional state-system in terms of organizing principles as regime type and ideological nature, the Arab Spring was the quest for an alternative regional order around new normative consensus. This consensus was formed by the common themes and drivers of the uprisings: democracy and human rights. Political Islam that was embodied in the MB's ascending to power gave the overall spirit to the course of events in a specific form. So, in this shape, the Arab Spring was seen by monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as an existential threat because of this normative consensus regarding the regional order (Tüzgen, 2019, pp. 216-231).

As a form of geopolitical reasoning, which intends to fulfil a survival policy through multiple strategies at different levels, the Arab Spring triggered an authoritarian counter-revolutionary wave led by authoritarian regimes as a response to the regional crisis challenging the present order (Aras & Falk, 2015). Saudi Arabia is the principal architect in this regional counter-revolutionary attempt through which it purposed to stop and reverse the revolutions by asserting its leadership within Sunni monarchies' block (Kamrava, 2012).

With its toxic combination of democracy and political Islam, in the eyes of the Emirati ruling circles, the Arab Spring was seen a threat to the UAE's political roots, regime survival, and its desired regional order as well. It was evaluated that the rise of political Islam in democratic forms, increasing the power of Iran, and terrorism across the region posed threats in terms of internal and external considerations for the status quo. Therefore, the UAE has become the key member of the counter-revolutionary axis (Krieg, 2019a, p. 107; Dorsey, 2014; Lynch, 2016, p. 38). In this vein, the UAE bandwagoned with Saudi Arabia in this counter-revolutionary strategy. This strategic cooperation is based on common threat perceptions deriving from the following facts of the Arab Spring: increasing power of Iran, the MB; collapsed states and regional order; and anxieties about the US's position. These factors provoked the formation of

assertive and militarized Saudi-Emirati strategic partnership within a multilateral framework (Ragab, 2017).

Consequently, region-wide block politics has become dominant between rival lines defending change versus status quo. Saudi and the UAE axis as the vanguards of the establishment have opposed a sort of revolutionary change promoted by the Arab Spring; therefore, they organized and supported counter-revolutionary movements with all their power in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, and Egypt. On the other side of the spectrum, Turkey and Qatar saw the upcoming change as an opportunity to expand their regional influence; therefore, they canalized their power for this goal in the same countries. This struggle has defined the new lines of amity and enmity shaping the region in the post-2011 era (Del Sarto, Malmvig, & Lecha, 2019, pp. 27-29).

This counter-revolutionary stance is vital to define and understand UAE's reaction to the Arab Spring-led change in the region. This is because this position forges the main framework of the emirate's foreign policy articulation. Its assertive counter-revolutionary position is mostly fostered by its threat perceptions regarding the regional dynamics. In this regard, after the onset of the regional uprisings, the UAE foreign policy has aimed at countering, firstly, the rise of the MB/political Islam with their regional supporters and, secondly, the growing Iranian penetration; restricting growing regional penetration of Qatar; and securing and enhancing its regional economic investments amid the regional shift (Sons & Wiese, 2015, pp. 12-13; Salisbury, 2020; Steinberg, 2020).

In a nutshell, under counter-revolutionary regional re-ordering, the UAE's foreign policy has purposed essentially to suppress and contain the rise of political Islam and the MB, to limit Iran's greedy regional penetration, and to balance Qatar's regional power aligned with the MB in the Arab Spring context. On the other hand, within this counter-revolutionary strategy, it has also opportunistically purposed to increase its regional political and economic penetration.

### **3.3.1.1. The Rise of the Political Islam**

The shift in the UAE's foreign policy has entailed by regional dynamics and domestic threat considerations. "The UAE government acted in response to the perceived threat from the Muslim Brotherhood, whose networks appear to have increased dramatically since 2011" (Almezaini K. , 2018, p. 196). Consequently, the foremost factor that characterizes the UAE's response to the Arab Spring is the rise of the MB across the region and threat calculations relating to this. So, to counter these threats, the UAE has targeted the MB and its affiliates by starting a harsh crackdown undertaking both inside of the country and across the region. At this point, it is safe to claim that the UAE's threat perception regarding the MB arises from its interconnectedly regional and domestic considerations.

#### **3.3.1.1.1. Domestic Threat Perception and Political Islam**

At the domestic level, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the relations between the MB and the Emirati have developed within Freer's rentier Islamism context. Primarily, as in its counterparts, the Emirati welcomed the flow of the members of the organization escaping from Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s due to the requirement of educated professionals in the fields of education and religion. These people worked in influential positions and affected the country's cultural formation and social capital. Soon after the formation of the UAE, in 1974, the Islah organization, branch of the MB in the Emirati, was established by the students who returned from Egypt in Dubai with the support of the ruling family of Dubai. Thereafter, the organization pervaded to the northern emirates in which the Islah has become more entrenched because of relative backwardness in comparison with Abu Dhabi and Dubai. In this initial phase, the Islah developed within the country under the patronage of the ruling elites. Similar to other super-rentier gulf states, the organization served in an ideological sense instead of the provision of goods or services. Besides cooperation in cultural and social aspects, the Islah also functioned to underpin the Islamist outlook of the country during the geopolitical struggle led by Arab nationalism in order to enhance the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of people (Freer, 2018, pp. 62-69).

In its initial phase, the relations between the Emirati Brotherhood and the UAE hinged on basic bargain: “shelter for da’wa (preaching) in exchange for refraining from politics” (Kourgiotis, 2020, p. 8). Nonetheless, these warm ties ended in the 1990s. Given its leaning to politics and reform calls, the government started to consider the Emirati Brotherhood powerful enough to pose a political threat to the status quo as the most influential non-state organization in the country. After that, the UAE gradually initiated its crackdown on the group under the leadership of Abu Dhabi. In 1995, after the failed assassination attempt to Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt, by Islamist radicals, it is claimed that the Islah had ties with these people (Freer, 2015). This incident gave the desired opportunity to the government to repress the organization inside. In 1995, “(t)he UAE authorities disbanded the administrative council of the Islah Society” (Zo'by & Başkan, 2015, p. 404). Under the 9/11 circumstances, the UAE intensified its pressures on the MB, which was perceived the enabler of radicalism milieu in the country, in order to indicate its willingness to the international society and its security partner the US in the fight against terrorism, for the involvement of two Emiratis in the attacks put the UAE at the middle of the debates by damaging its prestige and status. Even if MbZ attempted to persuade the organization to dissolve itself and operate just for Islamic da’wa without institutional structure, as in Qatar, he failed. This process is the second phase of the security crackdown on the Islah (Roberts D. , 2017a, pp. 553-554).

Although the government attempted to eradicate activities of the group, federal structure of the state has enabled the survival of the Islah. Each emirate of the UAE has distinct cultural, social, and economic features with different levels of development. Therefore, the Emirati Brotherhood developed its organizational capacity in a segmented way according to these facts. The emirates adopted varied attitudes to the Islah (Freer, 2018, pp. 62-68). Notably, the northern emirates have continued their supports and patronage for the group in spite of Abu Dhabi’s counter-position. Therefore, after the crackdown, it has managed to survive. Sheikh Saqr bin Muhammed al Qasimi, the ruler of Ras al Khaimah, permitted to the continuation of the Islah under his protection (Zo'by & Başkan, 2015, p. 404).

In short, it is rightly claimed that the MB has a history in the UAE full of ups and downs. At first, the Emirati Brotherhood was a valuable asset in the state formation

process to back up the Islamist legitimacy and discourse of the state against Arab nationalism. Yet, the direction of the wind has changed and the Islah occupied an essential place in the threat calculations of the government with the effects of changing external dynamics such as the 9/11 event since the 1980s. Despite this fact, the Islah protected its position and operated at the social and informal level in the country owing to the attitude difference between the emirates by 2011.

Even if there were no public protests in the UAE, a call for political reform letter triggered the states' security apparatus to overcome any chance of threat directing the stability and political order in the domestic realm by launching a crackdown notably on the Emirati Brotherhood. In 2011, the first phase of arrestments was focused on the petition that demanded political reform to enhance the power of the Federal National Council (FNC) and to implement elections for all members of the council. However, the second one specifically targeted the Islah and its-affiliated individuals. In 2012, the UAE started to arrest the leading members of the Islah and charged them with trying to overthrow and seize power in the country. More than one hundred of the members of the group were arrested and accused of committing a crime against the security of state and constitution (Freer, 2015) and plotting a coup attempt against the government in the UAE and the Gulf states to realize the MB's ideology, as General Dahi Khalfan Tamim, Commander in Chief of Dubai Police, had claimed (Kerr & Khalaf, 2012). In the end, the UAE formally designated the Islah and Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist organizations (UAE lists Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group, 2014).

So, as it is shown, the UAE repressed the Emirati Brotherhood inside by taking strict measures from the time of the Arab Spring. It had already strained-relations with the organization throughout the decades. But, these new developments meant the Arab Spring exposed and stimulated the deep fear of the UAE about its legitimacy formula and political stability (Lekhraibani, Rutledge, & Forstenlechner, 2015) for its regime security from the Emirati Brotherhood. Because the government saw the merge of Islamists and liberals in their reform demands as a hazardous attempt to political order inside. Moreover, increased pressure coincided with the regional development shaped by hopeful optimism and achievements of the Arab Spring for the MB (Freer, 2018, pp. 131-135).

Is merely such political reform petition enough to explain this political crackdown in the UAE? If the abovementioned accusation directed to the arrested members of the Islah is supported by solid evidences, the answer could be yes. However, as underscored by many, there is no proof of this (Freer, 2018, p. 135). Whether it is real or exaggerated, since some experts claim that the MB is not capable of being an existential threat for the UAE, (Almezaini K. , 2018, p. 196; Lekhraibani, Rutledge, & Forstenlechner, 2015) what is a fact is that the MB's rise in the regional context and the increased political discourse in domestic politics have been perceived as an existential threat for the regime security, sovereignty and order in the country (Freer, 2018, p. 139).

As Ulrichsen (2017a) notes, the emirate's threat perception comes from the MB's potential ability as the most influential social group to mobilize the people against the regime by agitating the present economic and political conditions. The wave of change-led by the Arab Spring toppled the authoritarian regimes in the region and, it even came to the coast of the Gulf monarchies such as Bahrain. Under this circumstance, the potential easily can come to the right and the Islah can exploit this situation to inspire transformation owing to its back-ground and religious-based discourse by pointing out the grievance in the country (pp. 192-193). This is because socio-economic, developmental, and cultural differences between the emirates create a ground for this kind of dangerous process for the UAE. The Northern Emirates have already suffered from the economic imbalances and underdevelopment in terms of job opportunities and infrastructure for a long time. Considering these facts, these emirates, particularly Ras al Khaimah and Fujairah, also hosted the Islah and permitted its operations under their protection despite Abu Dhabi's pressures (Roberts D. , 2017a, pp. 552-555; Ulrichsen, 2017a, pp. 192-193). In this context, there was a spillover potential in the country, which was seen as a security threat.

As a part of its broader survival strategy, the UAE's legitimacy formula includes both traditional and structural components. While the traditional side consists of a mix of personal, cultural, tribal, ideological, and religious resources, the other side consists of structural neo-patrimonial networks and material resources in rentier-state form. Nevertheless, the centerpiece of the UAE's legitimacy is its material power provided by oil-exports revenues and distributed through rentier packages in exchange for

political consent (Davidson C. , 2005, pp. 7-105). Hence, all these ingredients provide a working legitimacy for the monarchical rule. At this point, what the ideology of political Islam represents that it jeopardizes this agreed-upon basis of state-society relations. Because the social contract idea of this movement opposes secularistic, tribal, and neo-patrimonial elements; therefore, for the regime elites, political Islam undermines the regime security in domestic politics (Mason, 2018, p. 100).

As Al Zo'by and Başkan (2015) argue and illustrate that the regime's threat perception stems from the Islah's challenge for its legitimacy. It produced a systematic and fervent critique of the present state-society relations, namely the ruling bargain, by challenging the state's moral and political legitimacy. During the Arab Spring, the MB in the UAE adopted an oppositional discursive narrative around delicate issues as "the moral needs of society based on economic justice, human rights, civic rights, and rule of law" in a challenging way the legitimacy of the government (p. 407). In this respect, in domestic politics, it is safe to contend that the UAE's reaction to the rise of the MB in Arab Spring-led regional context has been boosted by the fear of regime survival and security stemming from, to a large extent, the normative challenge of the Islah and the MB in terms of the legitimacy rather than palpable attempts to security. In words of Al Zo'by and Başkan (2015),

the Brotherhood represents a challenge for the UAE not because it poses grave security and existential threat to the state and its political sovereignty, but rather because it generates oppositional discursive activism that contests the state's claim of legitimate power (p. 411).

### **3.3.1.1..2. Regional Threat Perception and Political Islam**

The UAE's regional counter-revolutionary position against the new forces, the MB, of the Arab Spring is driven by two factors: to refrain from the spillover effects of transition for domestic politics and to protect regional status quo. Because the MB' ascending to power through democratic elections in many countries of the region was perceived as an existential threat (Mason, 2018, pp. 97-100) for domestic politics due to the abovementioned legitimacy considerations and as an unfavorable blueprint threatening the UAE's vested interests and position due to the MB's imagination concerning state-society relations, the role of religion in politics, and democratic regime type. So, as emphasized by Krieg (2020), "its crusade against Islam" was

driven by Abu Dhabi's "fear of the soft power appeal of political Islam as the traditional opposition to the region's authoritarian status quo."

In the post-2011 era, Quinn Mecham (2014) divides the emergence of the Islamists as leading actors into two categories: militant and electoral Islam. In militant form, the crumbling authorities and the revolutions stuck in bloody deadlocks created a suitable condition in which the militant Islamists took the ground as the primary actors in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. On the other hand, the Islamists achieved great success in the first elections of the democratic transition durations. Islamist political parties in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco obtained historic achievements at the ballot boxes. This happened mostly because; firstly, Islamists had historical and institutional experience rooted in societies' memory; secondly, their competitors were very fragmented in different shapes; lastly, their messages covered by equality, democracy, and Islam were quite attractive for the people that were weary of authoritarianism. In this historical moment, as compatible with the uprisings common demands, Islamists took more pragmatic positions as well. Especially in Egypt, the MB inclined more freedom-centred discourse by increasing its commitment to democratic institutions and even the apolitical Salafi group joined the elections under the democratic frame (Al-Arian, 2014, pp. 106-116).

As a response to this regional trend, the UAE reacted by securitizing these Islamists under harsh measures to contain their powers across the region. Because, the MB, according to the UAE, is a disruptive and militant group aiming at creating a caliphate under one roof, violating state sovereignty and destabilizing its political systems. It has already been charged with participating in regional conspiracies to overthrow the regimes in the Gulf (Kor, 2018a).

It sees both militant and electoral forms of Islamism as the source of the radicalism of the region regardless of their differences between Salafist-jihadist and the MB. At one point, under this discourse, it legitimized and justified its harsh interventions in many countries. In this regard, it rejects all kinds of politicized Islam. This approach consists of the main channel feeding the UAE's policy implications in its foreign and domestic politics (Ibish, 2017, pp. 40-42).

This is because, in the eyes of the ruling elites of the UAE, Islamists, mostly the MB, were designated major security threats for internal stability and legitimacy of the political system as it is stressed above. Therefore, the proliferation of the Islamists as powerful and legitimate actors in the democratic processes in the Arab Spring constituted a very dangerous blueprint for the small monarchy of the Gulf (Davidson C. , 2019, p. 85). Put it differently, the idea of the Arab Spring in a specific form of democracy shaped with the spirit of political Islam constitutes a normative challenge for the UAE from two fronts: democracy and Islamism.

The high interaction of internal and external nexus in the Middle East politics intensified these security considerations of the elites in the state, for it makes the states' domestic politics vulnerable to external developments (Gause III F. G., 2009; Hinnebusch, 2014c). In line of this reasoning, Buzan and Waever (2003) develop a regional security complex theory and define regional security complexes as (RSCs) “a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another” (p. 44). In this sense, they define the Middle East as an RSC that consists of three subcomplexes: the Levant, Gulf, and Maghreb. In this system, domestic and regional levels reciprocally affect each other, which underpins the spillover effect of the domestic issues across the region (p.185-197). So, it can be safely argued that there is a high interconnectedness of security matters in the region and the wave of change of the Arab Spring that intensified in the Levant and Maghreb can quickly spread to the Gulf subcomplex so as to threaten the Gulf monarchies.

As highly underscored by Gause (2009), the salience of transnational identities is the most striking feature of the Middle East region and the Gulf sub-regional states system. Consequently, the gulf states act according to more ‘perceived threats’ than the balance of power considerations for their domestic stability and regime survival. In other words, they assess structural and external changes and formalize their security and foreign policy agenda through the lens of threat perception for their regime security, which is the result of the intersection of ideational and material factors. Therefore, these transnational ideologies have great potential to disrupt other states’ political stability and regime security by triggering the rulers’ threat perception (Rubin, 2014, pp. 2-10). States are quite interested in other states' internal politics to avoid any

backlash that would affect its internal politics and legitimacy. This is also the result of vulnerabilities of the regional states in terms of weak and problematic state-society relations.

In this context, domestic politics, in terms of regime types, is an essential element of the regional order in which there is a high level of interconnectedness of foreign policy and domestic politics. The spillover effect of the regional ideological threats is cautiously taken into consideration in security calculations. Because

(t)he sociopolitical logic of this external political threat is that the projection of domestic ideology through culturally resonant symbols could alter commonly held beliefs about the targeted regime's legitimacy and facilitate social unrest (Rubin, 2014, p. 4).

In this regard, change in regime type causes changes in foreign policies and order in the system. For instance, the French Revolution's impacts on the European order and the subsequent revolutionary and status quo struggle between states about the agreed-upon rules and principles of the regional order are the concrete evidence of the intertwined nature of regime type and regional order (Tüzgen, 2019, pp. 16-22). Similarly, as elucidated by Lawrence Rubin (2014), the Islamist takeovers in Iran (1979) and Sudan (1989) threatened Saudi Arabia and Egypt's national security. Even if there was no significant change in material power that would affect the balance of power. They assessed the ideational power of Islam as an undermining force of their regime stability and survival. Therefore, this process culminated in ideational balancing against this ideational threat.

Given the interconnected structure and ties among identities, interests, and norms; a shift in identity triggers a shift in these other factors. Therefore, a revolutionary change in state identity demands a change in the regional order in accordance with this new identity and interest formulation. The Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent attempts to export its revolution across the region aiming to create a like-minded community of states are good examples of the links between alternative proposals for regional order and identity related 'national role conceptions' (Tüzgen, 2019, p. 29). For Holsti (1970), national role conception "includes the policymakers' own

definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state and of the functions” (pp. 245-246).

As mentioned above, by the same token with previous revolutionary moments in the region, the Arab Spring led to the shift in identity and national role conception of the states in which the uprisings produced new revolutionary governments in democratic and political Islamist sense. This brought about the possibility of a normative challenge in the state-system against the status quo in order to reverberate revolutionary change throughout the region. Hence, from the UAE’s stance, besides domestic considerations, this revolutionary challenge conflicts its secular-Western-oriented regional vision, secular foreign policy, and its vested interest in the established order. It sees the political Islam as a threat to its legitimacy formula, “militantly anti-theocratic” (Ibish, 2017, p. 42) regime and the Jeffersonian-type of policy approach that rests on explicit separation between mosque and state (Roberts D. B., 2016b).

In this context, the UAE’s counter-position against the MB stems from, at one point, the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign realms and the presence of strong transnational identities, which instigated the fear of domestic considerations of regime survival for the ruling elites. Therefore, the UAE policies related to the MB and political Islam, at one point, have been shaped around to prevent any possibility of exporting the revolution by the MB that had roots in the UAE and other Gulf states (Steinberg, 2017, p. 66) and to promote its secular and authoritarian vision against democratic and Islamist consensus in the regional order. In words of Hussein Ibish (2017), “the UAE is convinced that Islamism and Islamists pose an existential threat, in the form of domestic subversion, regional destabilization, or mass terrorism” (p. 16). For this reason, in both the domestic and foreign realm, the Emirati conducted counter-revolutionary policies against what the Arab Spring ideas and actors defended.

The UAE’s security-obsessed approach to the rise of political Islam is characterized by the de-facto ruler MbZ’s personality as well. According to revealed diplomatic cables, MbZ has a very rigid stance for political Islam and MB. So, this personal position obsessed with the security of MbZ has become the state policy against Islamist groups in increasing scale as MbZ penetrates the state structure. Even before the Arab Spring, MbZ was concerned about the possible rise of Islamists through democratic

elections. Therefore, he saw Hamas's success in the 2006 elections as something that has the potential to pose a regional threat. In this regard, the US's discourse on the promotion of democracy in the Middle East was also dangerous for him (Davidson C. , 2019, p. 80). So, the Arab Spring exasperated this fear of MbZ regarding the danger of these groups for the region.

### **3.3.1.1.3. Manifestations of the Political Islam related security anxieties**

As cited in Ragab's (2017) work, according to senior Emirati official notes, the UAE's leading role in regional events intends to serve to counter the impacts of political Islam and threats about the regional order from the start of the Arab uprisings (p. 42). From this departure point, in the post-2011 period, the UAE's foreign policy implications aimed to downgrade the power of Islamist elements by putting its economic, military, and political power against the MB and other Islamist factions in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain. This means that "the UAE became the operational base of the wave of counter-revolution" (Kor, 2018b). In particular, after the electoral success of the MB in Egypt, the UAE increased its hands by declaring the organization as a serious security threat for the Gulf, in general, and itself. Subsequent duration has witnessed the second-largest economic and political campaign led by the UAE and its neighbors, except Qatar, to counter the MB posed threats across the region (Zo'by & Başkan, 2015, p. 406).

The emirate's securitization of the MB as an existential threat for itself, other Gulf monarchies, and broader regional order can be observed in statements of the high-level rulers. For example, in 2012, the foreign minister of the UAE declared the MB as "an organization which encroaches upon the sovereignty and integrity of nations" (Black, 2012). In this sense, the MB was depicted as a security threat jeopardizing the regime's security and operating beyond the sovereignty of the regimes by plotting coups to take the governments in the Gulf (UAE lists Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group, 2014).

Under these discourses, the UAE has conducted a region-wide crackdown against the MB just as in domestic politics. Egypt is the cornerstone of this counter-revolutionary politics due to its strategic status for regional politics. Under the Mubarak regime, the CCC states and Egypt developed complex interdependence in different sectors ranging

from economy to military (Farouk, 2014). These relations located Egypt at a quite central position in the GCC countries' regional politics. Therefore, the UAE was very anxious about the revolutionary change in Egypt. The loss of a strategic partner and the MB's likely rise to power in Egypt concerned the UAE for a possible regional transformation in the ongoing Arab Spring process. So, the UAE took a very proactive position versus the MB in Egypt, which intensified after the presidential elections won by the MB's candidate Morsi. Furthermore, the UAE on a large scale was involved in the 2013 military coup and supported the counter-revolution in Egypt by putting its political and economic power behind the Sisi regime (Telci, 2017, pp. 230-236). As David D. Kirkpatrick (2015) notes, the UAE played a leading role in the realization and organization of the coup as well as its role in merely promoting the dissident movements. In the post-coup era, the UAE became the chief financier and political supporter of the Sisi regime and the suppression of the MB together with Saudi Arabia.

The regional design of Saudi and Emirati pillar was embodied in Egypt under the Sisi regime that was purified from political Islam and fitted into authoritarian and secular character. In this form, Egypt also functioned as a showcase of authoritarian stability of counter-revolutionary vision for the region as it tried to carry out in Libya after 2014. So, the success of Egypt under Sisi regime was crucial for the UAE's interests and security concerns in its region-wide fight with the MB. That is why the UAE mobilized all its power and efforts noted below in Egypt. It granted generous financial packages at least \$18 billion in the form of credit and assistance in the following years of the coup (Rantisi & Kekilli, 2017, pp. 13-14). Moreover, it provided technical assistance coordinated by UAE-Egypt Task Force to support reforms, developed military cooperation and canalized its state-owned companies' destination to Egypt as in the example of \$45 billion worth of 'new capital' real estate project (Sons & Wiese, 2015, pp. 34-37).

After the overthrowing of Qaddafi, Libya has been dragged on a major civil war and de facto divided between East and West since 2014. The country's political system was fragmented between two rival political factions and militias aligned with these factions as a result of the failed democratic transition process. In general, the division took place between the General National Congress (GNC) and the House of Representatives (HoR), claiming legitimacy by taking support from two major

coalitions of militias; Haftar-led the Operation Dignity and the Libyan National Army (LNA) for the HoR and the Libya Dawn militia alliance against Haftar forces for the GNC (Toaldo, 2016). In addition to the internal roots of the Libyan civil war, the high-level involvement of external powers also facilitated and intensified this war by instigating the multiple and fragmented actors' fight with each other for their interests (Fraihat, 2016, p. 94). The UAE is the primary one of these powers since its interventions deeply affected the political picture in Libya. It took a direct and assertive role in the fall of Qaddafi by participating and promoting NATO-led military operation in Libya. Moreover, in the subsequent process, the UAE attempted to shape the political future of Libya according to its policy preferences. At the top, there was the goal of constraining the Libyan MB and other Islamists' role in the new state-building. Therefore, at first, the emirates supported Mahmoud Cibril against Islamist actors in the GNC. But, the UAE's allies could not manage to downgrade Islamists' dominant position (Rantisi & Kekilli, 2017, pp. 16-18). Thereafter, since 2014, the UAE became the main power behind General Khalifa Haftar who initiated a war and coup attempt in 2014 under the title of 'Operation Dignity' against revolutionary Islamist militias and the legitimate parliament to take control of Libya under his military government rule. He also started to build parallel government structures as the Libyan National Army (LNA) competing with Tripoli. With the assistance of its external allies, General Haftar, in a short time, unified the remnants of the ancient regime and secular dissidents against revolutionaries, so-called Islamists, and managed to gain considerable presence in military and political fields of Libya so as to obstruct any reasonable political solution against his and regional partners will as in the UN-led Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) (Kekilli, 2017, pp. 167-177).

Similar secular and authoritarian political visions under broader-counterrevolutionary strategy bonded interests of Sisi, MbZ, and Haftar. So, "(a) de facto alliance focused on regional security has emerged between these three players who share a hostile attitude towards "political Islam", in particular, that embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)" (Mühlberger, 2018, pp. 77-78). This alliance brought about military cooperation in the field. The UAE funneled its weapons and military equipment into Libya to back Haftar's military operations by breaking the UN's international arms embargo. Moreover, as a more courageous and aggressive step, the

UAE unilaterally operated two airstrikes against Islamist militias in cooperation with Egyptian military in 2014 (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, p. 199).

In his efforts, the UAE also canalized its diplomatic, military, and economic powers. Diplomatically, to manipulate the peace process and the political agreement-led by the UN, the UAE developed close relations with Bernardino Leon who was the UN Special Envoy to Libya between 2014-2015. In 2015, he was appointed as the first director-general of Emirates diplomatic academy (Rantisi & Kekilli, 2017, p. 17). According to leaked e-mails, he specifically took a side in the peace process in favor of the Haftar block in cooperation with the UAE (Full text of email from UN Libya envoy Bernardino Leon to UAE foreign minister, 2015).

Similar anti-Brotherhood impulses drove the UAE's actions in Yemen. Given its strategic location and closeness to the Emirates, the revolution in Yemen was a direct challenge for the UAE. Hence, the UAE's intervention in the post-2011 era was also very direct and assertive to influence the political process and turmoil in Yemen. In this vein, the restricting power of the Islah, the Yemeni Brotherhood, was one of the essential components of the UAE's activities in Yemen (Ragab, 2017, pp. 45-46). To this end, in 2015, it participated Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen: 'Operation Decisive Storm' that purposed to integrate Mansour Hadi's rule and eliminate the Houthi movement affiliated with Iran. In a way, the Yemen civil war is the outcome of an unsuccessful GCC-designed transition process that took place after Yemeni uprisings in 2011. This plan aimed at replacing president Ali Abdallah Saleh with Mansour Hadi in a controlled way in order to ensure the stability of Yemen in favor of the GCC states security. Yet, the process embroiled the country in a major civil war between various power centres aligned around two general configurations Hadi and his supports; and Saleh and his ally the Houthis (Darwich, 2018, pp. 127-131). The UAE military involved in the operation with nearly 1.500 soldiers and intense air campaigns as the leading partner (Riedel, 2015). Despite the common discourse constructed by Saudis in a sectarian sense to legitimize its war by demonizing the Houthis as the proxy of Iran, the fact that the UAE's interferences in Yemen focused on its own strategic and security priorities. Unlike Saudi Arabia, as underscored by many, the Emirate pursued its way to eliminate the Yemini MB and its allies in the political future of Yemen (Freer, 2016). For this purpose, its military activities

concentrated on southern Yemen in which the Islah movement's presence was most intense (Rantisi & Kekilli, 2017, pp. 20-21).

Tunisia is another country in which the UAE's efforts intended to restrain political Islam. For this purpose, the emirates became involved in Tunisian politics, but to a lesser extent. It supported Nidaa Tounes, which consists of secularists and remnants of the old regime, vis-à-vis Islamist leaning Ennahda party that was seen by the UAE as an extension of the revolutionary alignment of Qatar-Turkey-the MB (Sons & Wiese, 2015, pp. 58-59; Lynch, 2016, p. 93). In a similar vein, the UAE's strategy in Syria has been driven by the same anti-Islamist impulses; therefore, it initially backed non-Islamist and anti-Brotherhood groups within the opposition. But after 2015, it changed its position and started to build new formal relations with the Assad regime (Daher, 2019).

Besides the abovementioned hard power balancing against threats, in the form of ideological balancing, the UAE also dedicated its ideational resources to balance the MB (Rubin, 2014, p. 2). It has become the chief advocator of 'moderate Islam' against all forms of politicized Islam; yet, mostly against the non-violent political Islam represented by the MB owing to the fact that the Emirati assesses it as a real security challenger. It utilized the discourse of apolitical moderate Islam as a soft power strategy. This sort of instrumentalization of a particular form of Islam has functioned so as to discredit the political Islam and legitimize its containment efforts against it, on the one hand, and to elevate its image as a part of political diplomacy in the Western world, on the other hand (Kourgiotis, 2020, pp. 2-10). Andreas Krieg (2020) states that this promotion of quietist Sufism purposes to strengthen the view that aims to de-politicize the people by enabling the concentration of sociopolitical power by the state versus Islamist narrative intends to politicize the people with particular political goals that undermine the statist status quo. In this vein, the Emirati has encouraged religious centers as in Libya, Egypt in order to propagate an apolitical and moderate form of Islam: Sufism.

Furthermore, via various forums, conferences, and special relations, the UAE propagated the moderate form of Islam across the region. 'Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies' (PEACEMS) and 'Muslim Council of Elders' launched are two

of these initiatives aiming at countering the ‘International Union of Muslim Scholars’ under the leadership of prominent Brotherhood member Yusuf el-Karadavi and spreading an apolitical sort of Islam (Kor, 2018a). It also cultivated special relations with Al-Azhar University, which is one of the most prominent moderate Sunni establishments, through bilateral memorandums and projects that were funded by the UAE in accordance with abovementioned goals; this is another sign of ideological balancing as a part of its soft power (Ibish, 2017, pp. 38-39; Kourgiotis, 2020, p. 6). More marginally, in collaboration with Saudi Arabia, the UAE’s support for Medhali Salafism, which indoctrinates absolute submission to state authority, in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen is another instance of how the Emirati instrumentalizes religion in its regional political desires and fight against its adversaries (Kekilli, 2019).

### **3.3.1.2. The Rise of Iran**

The UAE considers Iran as an existential security threat. This threat perception is mainly derived from border disputes; that is, Iran occupied three islands of the Abu Musa, Lesser Tunb, and Greater Tunb, which are located near to the very strategic chokepoint of the Straits of Hormuz for international gas and oil trade, in 1971 by taking advantage from the British withdrawal (Rugh, 1996, pp. 60-61). Rather, their relations rest on a more complicated set of policy configurations. Yoel Guzansky (2015b) emphasizes four factors determining these combinations. These are geographic closeness, Iranian diaspora in Dubai, substantial trade relations, and occupied Islands issue. However, the occupation of Islands as a traumatic event has shaped the Emirates security articulations and relations with Iran in the next era. The 1979 revolution in Iran has complicated and deepened the security concerns of the UAE because of Iran’s policy of exporting the revolution to other regional states. The Iran-Iraq War starting in 1980 instigated the Gulf states’ security anxieties. In this regional turmoil, the GCC founded in 1981 with the participation of the small Gulf states under Saudi leadership as a collective security strategy against Iran’s ideological challenge for their internal regime security (Gause III, 2009, pp. 46-87).

In addition to border disputes, there is a large amount of Shia Iranian diaspora in Dubai, nearly 400.000. These people forge a source of instability for domestic politics by instigating security anxieties of a fifth column threatening the UAE security (Katzman,

2020b, p. 10). On the other hand, strong commercial ties between Iran and the UAE makes relations and security matters more complicated. The UAE, in particular Dubai, is one of the biggest trade partners of Iran with the greatest share of the GCC, %80 of it, serving as a critical strategic re-export location. Therefore, the trade with Iran amounted to \$23 billion in 2010; however, it started to fall on a large scale due to the international sanction in the following process (Ibish, 2017, p. 25).

The internal dynamics of the UAE are another element that complicates the picture. The emirates within the federation have adopted different approaches to Iran due to mostly varied levels of commercial relations and the presence of Iranian diaspora as well. For example, in the Iran-Iraq War, this division became more apparent in their picking of sides. Although the UAE remained neutral, the emirates took conflicting positions. Whereas Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, and Fujairah supported Iraq through financial means, Dubai, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain sided with Iran by continuing their trade relations that served as a crucial transit route in Iran's war efforts (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, p. 213). In this vein, it can be argued that, as in the Islam question, disagreements between the emirates regarding the Iran issue exasperate the federal government's security concerns and make, to some degree, the country open to Iran's manipulation.

This division has continued in the 2000s as well. As Ulrichsen (2017a) notes, "Abu Dhabi has emerged as a strategic hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue even as Dubai functioned as a loophole in the international sanctions on Iran" (p. 212). This trend has steered for Abu Dhabi's position under the MbZ's aggressive policies after the Arab Spring (Vakil, 2018, p. 13). The changing balance of power in favor of Abu Dhabi after the 2008 crisis in which it provided bailout money valued at \$29 billion to prevent the bankruptcy of Dubai facilitated this foreign policy transition (Miller, 2016, p. 176). In a nutshell, besides its economic pragmatism,

the UAE government has long viewed Iran as its most serious security threat based on Iran's alleged ambitions in the Persian Gulf, its ideology and rhetoric, its weapons acquisition program, its purported support for terrorism, and its control over the disputed islands (Kamrava, 2018c, p. 116).

In this context, similar to Qatar's strategy mentioned in the previous chapter, the UAE's ties with Iran swinging between cooperation and balance with the threat can be conceptualized under the hedging strategy. As El-Dessouki and Mansour (2020) contend that the UAE has also conducted a hedging strategy towards Iran since 1971. This strategy consists of three pillars: Soft-balancing in multilateral and diplomatic fields, engagement at especially economic, but also, political, and social levels, and hard-balancing in form of building alliances with the US and Saudi Arabia.

In the post-2011 period witnessed the ascending regional penetration of Iran and its proxies all along the region. The Middle East's former revolutionary state of Iran eagerly welcomed the uprising and capitalized the fall of the guards of the regional status-quo by attempting to fill the power vacuum in many countries. In the process, Iran turned itself into an influential political and economic player located in key positions of regional transition. It elevated its degree of military and political penetration in Iraq and Syria in which Iran appeared as one of the main supporters of the Assad regime with Russia in the Syrian War by fighting side by side with the regime soldiers. In the continuing line, it remained the key power in Lebanese politics over Hizballah. Moreover, the Houthis and their relations with Iran put it at the centre of Yemeni turmoil as one of the essential stakeholders. So, this expansionist policy of Iran over sectarian reasoning in regional conflicts posed major security threats for regional powers (Ulutaş & Duran, 2018, pp. 91-92).

The UAE is one of these powers. Security concerns regarding the increasing sphere of influence of Iran across the region after 2011 embittered the UAE's existential security threat perception from Iran (Mason, 2018, pp. 97-98; Steinberg, 2020). As a response to this threat, "UAE policy in east Africa, Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere is driven largely by the UAE objective of weakening Iran" (Katzman, 2020b, p. 10).

#### **3.3.1.2..1. Manifestations**

The foreign policy response of the UAE to this threat perception relating Iran in the Arab Spring context manifested itself in its acts. First of all, this increasing regional profile of Iran has brought about a change in the UAE's policy formulation towards Iran in a more concrete and hawkish way. This meant the replacement of strategic

hedging with a more hard-balancing policy. This shift can be observable in palpable actions of the Emirati. In terms of external balancing, it has deeply strengthened its strategic relations with the US and Saudi Arabia to counter Iranian influence. Beyond this, through enhancing and modernizing its military capacity, the UAE has resorted to internal balancing as well. Other than these, the ambitious interventions in other countries in military, economic, and political forms have constituted one of the central components of the UAE balancing strategy against Iran (El-Dessouki & Mansour, 2020).

At the official level, the UAE's leaders have blamed Iran because of its interventionist, sectarian, and expansionist policies (There is no room for colonialism in today's world, 2017). In this regard, these expressed concerns of the Emirati about Iran's activities in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain translated into concrete policies in the field to roll back Iranian influence (Ibish, 2017, p. 24). In Bahrain, the 2011 uprisings targeting the Al Khalifa regime shook the Gulf stability and security considerations by exposing the regimes' fear of possible spillover effect of the Arab Spring and regime change in Bahrain so as to enhance Iran's involvement via major Shia population. Thereby, this was a crucial security problem for the UAE and its neighbors (Guéraiche, 2019, pp. 398-399). With 600 police forces, the UAE was one of the active participants of the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force that directly interfered in Bahrain to promote the Al Khalifa ruling. This behavior was mostly conducted under Saudi Arabia's position and driven by the search for sub-regional stability and the impulse of overcoming Iranian threat. Because the intervention was presented and justified under Iran's expansionist and sectarian inference in Bahrain (Ragab, 2017, pp. 42-43). A similar military interventionist policy has been conducted by the UAE in Yemen since 2015, as was noted above. The UAE, at one point, shared Saudi Arabia's goals in Yemen in order to halt Iran-backed the Houthis from taking a foothold in Yemeni political future (Salisbury, 2020, p. 33; Partrick, 2017). Because they were afraid of the possible formation of an Iran-backed Hezbollah-style organization in Yemen (Steinberg, 2020, p. 24).

### **3.3.1.3. Containing Qatar's Influence**

The UAE's response to the Arab Spring is very related to its close neighbor Qatar's response that is explained above. Balancing and restraining Qatar's increasing regional influence in the context of the Arab Spring is another impetus driving the UAE foreign policy implementations (Sons & Wiese, 2015, p. 13). The competition between these two small gulf states is not new actually. They have contested in economic, commercial, and state-branding arenas for a long time. However, in the post-2011 era, this rivalry was transformed into a political one. Because of the fact that Qatar took a revolutionary position and put its support and power behind the revolutionary actors mainly the MB and more nuanced relations with Iran in the Arab Spring, the UAE's concerns about the rise of Qatar are directly interrelated with its abovementioned securitization of the MB and Iran (Steinberg, 2020, p. 27). In this regard, intertwined with the UAE's security perception and vision about the regional order, the UAE's ruling elites, especially MbZ, located "Qatar as not only a full member of the enemy camp, but also the state that was doing the most to elevate any previously existential threat to their regimes posed by political Islam into a veritable, more imminent threat" (Davidson C. , 2019, p. 86).

#### **3.3.1.3.1. Manifestations**

The UAE's containing policy targeting Qatar essentially became evident in its regional politics. "Whereas Qatar has provided material and armed support for revolutionary groups, the UAE found themselves supporting the counterrevolutionaries" (Krieg, 2019a, p. 101). In this respect, the UAE's positioning coincides with anti-Qatar block in the region. It picked its sides against Qatar by canalizing its economic, military, and political power to undermine the revolutionary position of Qatar. In Libya, the competition was intense. They operated in competitive edges of the civil war after the fall of Qaddafi. Against Qatari-backed networks, the UAE put its power behind the secular-nationalist factions and Haftar, especially after 2014. The UAE's support for Nedaa Tounis in Tunisia and Sisi in Egypt vis-à-vis Qatari-inclined revolutionary Islamists Ennahda and Morsi intended to undermine Qatar's regional influence (Lynch, 2016, pp. 89-93).

Further, this rivalry became evident in a soft power war in which the conflicting narratives were released through distinct channels. The UAE spearheaded anti-Qatar propaganda by promoting its narrative over Qatar in front of the international community. It specifically worked for branding Qatar as a sponsor of terrorists and its Islamist allies, especially the MB as terrorists by resorting to lobbying in the US and mobilizing prominent think tanks such as the Hudson Institute in this way (Krieg, 2019a, pp. 102-107).

The UAE also spearheaded two crises in 2014 and 2017 to isolate and weaken Qatar in the region. As a backlash against Qatar's policies during the revolts at the regional level, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014. This was labelled as the worst diplomatic crisis in the GCC history until 2017 (Toumi, 2014). After relative improvement, another crisis broke out in 2017. At this time, Qatar was blockaded by the same countries that cut off transport links to Qatar as well as diplomatic ties under the accusations of financing and promoting terrorism and radicalism across the region (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). In conclusion, these two crises putting Qatar on the target board are significant indicators of the clashing regional visions and security considerations of the two countries in narrow scale and the region in broader scale in the Arab Spring.

#### **3.3.1.4. Power Projection**

The rationale behind the UAE's policy responses to the Arab Spring is clarified above around the proliferation of security threats for the regime and counter-actions to them. However, this is only one side of the story. The UAE's policy adaptation is much more than a balancing act against the Arab Spring related threats. Rather, it also attempted to become full-fledged regional power by taking advantage of the regional change in an opportunist way. In this vein, the UAE has engaged with regional politics so that it would project its power and expand regional penetration through military, economic, diplomatic means for pursuing its interests. Changing regional balance of power in favor of the Gulf states, the fall of traditional power centers, multiplication of non-state actors, and the US' retrenchment have paved the way for more independent, assertive, and pragmatist expansionism of the UAE under the regional power vacuum. To put it differently, to fill the regional power vacuum, "countering what is perceived

as a threat to their national security and repositioning themselves as regional powers” are the main motivations for the UAE and its security ally Saudi Arabia (Ragab, 2017, p. 41). Of course, filling the vacuum has occurred within the counter-revolutionary lines in favor of the Emirati’s interest.

So, in terms of economic, political, and military, particularly in the post-2013 period, the UAE has deeply put itself at the center of essential regional hotspots for increasing its regional footprints. It contributed to and took a leading role in international coalitions against ISIS and Qaddafi regime. In this vein, stressed by Rickli (2016) as in the example of the Libya case, the UAE’s efforts work to enhance its role as a reliable partner for the Western powers in political aspect and its military abilities in form of power projection and military experiences. Not only securing its old investments but also increasing its economic presence in the region amid the regional turmoil has been purposed by the UAE. Its involvement in Egypt’s economy in the post-2013 period is a clear example of the Emirati’s impetus for economic power projection (Sons & Wiese, 2015; Young K. E., 2017).

One of the most visible evidence of this power projection has taken place across the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and the East Mediterranean. By doing this the UAE has become “a small maritime empire between the Gulf of Oman and the Red Sea, and established itself as a regional power in the south-western Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa” through military bases and DP World’ ports for its economic, military, and political goals (Steinberg, 2020, p. 6).

Thanks to its geostrategic location and dominance in shipping and ports, the UAE has become one of the biggest trade partners and investors of Africa by capitalizing on the rise of Africa in terms of economic opportunities. In the process, this economic cooperation led to the formation of military presence here, not only for the UAE but also for other Gulf states (Todman, 2018). Especially after the Arab Spring, the Red Sea corridor and its strategic connections turn into a strategic priority for the Emirati. In this respect, the UAE’s economic and security interests are linked with other states located across this route. Thus, to enhance its strategic depth, the UAE increased its power by controlling strategic footholds (The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, 2018).

As a result, in order to strengthen its position and geopolitical influence vis-a-vis its regional competitors such as Qatar and Turkey and other militant agents such as the Houthis and ISIS, the UAE established five military bases in Socotra and Perim Islands in Yemen; Somaliland and Puntland regions in Somalia, Assab in Eritrea in the post-2014 era. All of these are extremely strategic locations that line up along the strategic chokepoints Suez, Bab al-Mandab, and Hormuz straits for the international goods, oil, and gas trade flowing to Europe from the region. In this regard, these military bases appear as a new instrument of the UAE's foreign policy shaped around its hard-power capacities. This expansion of the UAE via military bases in Africa has been driven by its desire of being an influential regional power, confronting security threats, mainly originated in the presence of armed groups such as the Houthis in Yemen, securing and taking under control trade routes for both itself and its allies, and struggling with its regional peer competitors (Telci & Horoz, 2018).

In this picture, the UAE's steadfast and ambitious policies in Libya and Egypt must be contextualized as a continuation of this expansionist strategy. Owing to commercial and military presence in strategic ports and chokepoints, the UAE aims to clinch its regional position. Therefore, these two countries are the complementary pieces in this network opening to the East Mediterranean which is the new hotspot of the regional power struggle (Ataman & Karaduman, 2020, pp. 8-13). In 2016, it is reported that the UAE started to develop a new military airbase in Libya. Thus, "the presence in Libya of Emirati military installations gives the UAE additional strategic depth, adding to the assets in the Horn of Africa region" (Ibish, 2017, p. 35). That's why the UAE insists on the authoritarian leadership of Sisi and Haftar in these countries under its control. Similarly, its assertive intervention and policies in Yemen must be assessed "as part of the UAE's broader thrust to occupy pivotal positions all around the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean" (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020, p. 16).

### **3.3.1.5. Counter-Revolutionary Regional Re-Design**

In the post-2011 era, the UAE turned itself into a small but influential regional power. It affected major political processes in the region as a part of a counter-revolutionary regional re-ordering. In here, the UAE's impetus is to achieve, first, to refrain from all manner of revolutionary change and secure its regime power. Second is to reverse

impacts of the Arab Spring-led change and its normative proposal across the region and replace it with its regional vision revolving around a specific form of authoritarian stability that “consists of like-minded strongmen who prioritize security over liberalism and force centralized governance over inclusive socio-politics” (Quilliam, 2019, p. 110). The last one is to entrench itself into the new re-ordering of the system as one of the key power brokers. Therefore, the abovementioned threat perceptions and counter-actions of the UAE must also be read as a part of this re-design project.

In this line of reasoning, the UAE in de facto cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US under Trump presidency deeply involved the regional crisis in promoting its regional vision that aims at reviving the authoritarian status quo (Ulutaş & Duran, 2018, pp. 103-104). Around shared threat perception about the regional politics after the Arab Spring, the UAE and Saudi axis has come to the same line with Israel in a tacit alliance (Guzansky, 2015a, pp. 143-145). Eroding centrality of the Palestinian issue, Iran’s nuclear ambition and regional influence, similar concerns regarding the ascending of Islamist factions, and the US’s non-interventionist regional policy orientation have merged the regional interests and policies of the UAE and Israel. As well as this broader regional policy, the rapprochement has become evident in military, business, technical cooperation (Black, 2019).

Frustrations from Obama’s regional policies forced the UAE to take a more effective role in the 2016 US presidential elections. Before and after the elections, MbZ has cultivated direct and strategic ties with the inner circle of Trump’s decision-making team through back-channel efforts of Yousef al-Otaiba, the Emirati ambassador in Washington, and George Nader, advisor of MbZ (Mazzetti, Kirkpatrick, & Goldman, 2018; Akkad & Cobain, 2019). As revealed by David Hearst (2018), some rulers of the conservative counterrevolutionary block, including MbZ, gathered on a yacht in the Red Sea in late 2015 and agreed on the importance of their involvement into the 2016 election process in favor of Trump in order to impose their interests and security concerns in Washington. Nader was the key connector between the US and the regional actors. This “Red Sea Conspiracy” is seen as a bargain over the future of the Middle East in which the US must put its will and power behind the counter-revolutionary blueprint. That’s why they mobilized their illegal and legal efforts for triumph of Trump. In exchange for this support, they expected that the US would promote their

policies aiming to isolate revolutionary powers Turkey and Qatar, to contain Iran's power and nuclear ambitions, and carry out the avid regional restoration (Abramson, 2019, p. 29).

The Emirati and its allies pursued very expansionist and interventionist foreign policy that eventually de-stabilized the region by exacerbating the fault lines. In this context, the phase of aggressive counter-revolutionary design had started in 2013 with Sisi's coup against Morsi in Egypt. After this turning point, the fervor of optimistic aura of the Arab Spring was gradually assimilated by the UAE and its allies under secular and militarist authoritarianism by resorting military interventions, economic and martial aid, and diplomatic backing (Ulrichsen K. C., 2017a, p. 201). Within this frame, right after Sisi's takeover the power in Egypt, Haftar initiated his preparations for the similar takeover in Libya under the supervision of Saudi-Emirati axis (Kekilli, 2017, p. 169). And in the following process, the UAE's greedy for implementation of this model pushed Libya into a destructive civil war, which can be seen as a microcosm of the broader revolutionary and counter-revolutionary competition. The next stage of the theatre was performed in 2014. The UAE and Saudi Arabia attempted to punish Qatar due to its revolutionary politic by withdrawing their ambassadors. It is the essential sign of how deep the rift was within the GCC. For the sake of its regional agenda, the UAE jeopardized the unity of the GCC. This process was repeated in the 2017 Gulf crisis under harsher sanctions against Qatar. The military intervention in Yemen is another manifestation of this continuum as well.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

As it is explained, in the Arab Spring process, the UAE conducted an interventionist and assertive foreign policy against the regional transformation and revolutionaries in many countries. It acted in that way since the UAE saw the structural change as a source of threat to its regime security. But it also saw the Arab Spring-led regional change as an opportunity to increase its power and influence in the region. This position of the UAE is formed as a result of its threat perception to regime security that stems from its domestic and leader level features.

As by-products of the Arab Spring process, the rising power of the Muslim Brotherhood, the increasing influence of Iran, collapsing regimes and civil wars, Qatar's revolutionary stance, and withdrawal of US support for Mubarak, all of these have become new sources of threats for the UAE by increasing its vulnerability. Also, the US position and the falling of Mubarak regime in Egypt has fostered the 'self-help' situation for the UAE to take care of itself by conducting relative independent and interventionist foreign policy to counter these threats but also increasing its sphere of influence throughout the region in the insecure environment under the power vacuum condition. Given these reasons, the UAE has attempted to organize the region through aggressive diplomatic and military interventions as well as financial supports as exemplified earlier.

Consequently, the UAE assessed the structural change and the upcoming events as a threat to its regime security and regional status quo because of its domestic features and leader-level characteristics. So, it has acted with Saudi Arabia to counter the common perceived threats in the region in a counter-revolutionary way. By taking advantage of Saudi Arabia' regional weightiness and counter-revolutionary strategy, on the other hand, the UAE pursued its own agenda within this alliance for enhancing its region-wide sphere of influence. In other words, balancing the threats by taking advantage of regional chaos and power vacuum for self-interested power projection.

## **CHAPTER IV**

# **QATAR AND THE UAE: TRACING THE ROOTS OF THE DIVERGENCE**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In the prior two chapters, firstly, the foreign policies of Qatar and the UAE were introduced. Then, their reactions to the Arab Spring were detected by focusing on the change in their foreign policies. Lastly, the logic and reasons behind their reactions were hypothesized and these hypotheses and arguments were verified through tracing causal mechanisms so as to make solid evidence-based inferences about causal relations.

Now, it is time to compare these two small gulf states' foreign policy responses. In this regard, the main purpose of this chapter is to indicate why Qatar and the UAE reacted to the Arab Spring-led change in a conflicting way under different revolutionary and counter-revolutionary blocks. To find a proper answer to this question and also explain their unconventional foreign policies exceeding accustomed molds of small states' behavior, in the below, initially, these countries' rise will be put in a context by examining the facilitator structural dynamics. Then, within the neo-classical framework, their diverging reactions will be analyzed as a result of varied assessments of the Arab Spring-led change that stem from different threats and power perceptions about it. This is also shaped by unit-level differences such as domestic structures and elites' preferences.

### **4.2. Putting the Rise of Qatar and the UAE in a Context**

Qatar and the UAE as the relatively new and wealthiest states of the region share so many similar features as historical experiences and state formation processes; fears

stemming from their smallness and neighbors' power in an unstable region; rentier and neo-patrimonial structures; hydrocarbon-relied economies; ruling bargain; dynastic, tribal and personalized characteristic of politics; lack of organized civil societies; the extreme proportion of expatriates in populations (Roberts D. , 2017a; Davidson C. , 2019). In the first place, while their domestic politics were concentrated on state-building initiatives at home, their foreign policies were in the quest for external protection from the power struggles of Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. In this regard, their survival strategies have articulated around building security ties with external patrons and state-branding strategies that aim to make these small states worth to protect from predators. Therefore, both of them use the US' military presence as a strategic balancing act vis-à-vis Iran at the regional level and Saudi Arabia within the GCC to overcome vulnerabilities stemming from smallness (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020, p. 2).

Just before the Arab Spring, Qatar and the UAE were the two promising small states of the region. They have well-positioned themselves in the international system by carving niche strategies under the protection of the US security umbrella. In the international theater as small but influential actors, they have benefitted from the same structural enablers in their ascending.

In this sense, Ulrichsen (2012) investigates these two countries' rise in the global and regional context, which was enabled by the convergence of several domestic and international factors: the oil-windfall exceeding \$ 900 billion accumulated by the GCC states during the oil boom between 2002-2008; the shifting center of economic gravity of the world in favor of the East and thanks to hydrocarbon resources and strategic location, the Gulf states emerged as crucial pivots in the global rebalancing. Furthermore, the generational shift in the rulers and the lack of restraints in the domestic politics of Qatar and the UAE have facilitated these structural factors' assessments to locate themselves in a very influential position beyond traditional lines of small powers' politics in the international arena.

All of these changes have spurred the increased visibility and interventionist foreign policy articulation of the UAE and Qatar in wide range realms. Because, by adopting hybrid economic and political policies, they capitalized on the benefits of globalization

windfall, which is coincided with oil price peak and power shift to younger ruling generations who have will to embrace the new opportunities (Young K. E., 2013, pp. 5-8).

Globalization has changed the nature of the concept of power (Kamrava, 2017, pp. 102-116). So, the link between size and power has faded so that the small states would benefit from the new opportunities using their financial powers as leverage to boost their international status as in the case of Qatar and the UAE (Ulrichsen, 2012, p. 10). In this vein, beyond traditional lines, Crystal A. Ennis (2018) conceptualizes 'entrepreneurial power' as a combination of different sorts of powers allowing the exercise of power regardless of size and conventional molds for influence and status-seeking. This entrepreneurial power has been operationalized through diplomatic, state branding, and economic capacities of Qatar and the UAE and it has facilitated their status-building quests in the domestic and international arena. Thereby, these countries' distinctiveness arises from their ability of wielding economic powers articulated around particular niche strategies for certain goals, making themselves valuable to protection under the state-branding strategy, by benefitting from changes in the international dynamics under unrestricted and dynamic leaderships. In this line of reasoning, "(e)xercises of power in Qatar and the UAE have been characterized as soft, smart, or subtle." (Ennis, 2018, p. 578).

Under this convenient environment, Qatar and the UAE have adopted many divergent policy strategies for enhancing their status and power. They have heavily invested to improve their image and soft power to make themselves valuable in front of the Western world. In this regard, through wide-range soft-power and state-branding initiatives and tools from strategic high-level economic investments to cultural undertakings as international education centers and museums, Qatar and the UAE attempted to embed themselves within the international politics and to consolidate their alliances with the Western powers. These kinds of state-branding initiatives are the key to ensure their regime survival as a small state in a highly insecure region (Davidson C. , 2013, pp. 79-104).

The role of Gulf states' petrodollars in getting out of the 2008 financial crisis is an important and early indicator that shows not only the strategic ties between the Gulf

states and the West but also the degree of power and policy eagerness of the Gulf states to increase their strategic presence in the international system (Miller R. , 2016).

Besides the mentioned structural facilitators, the changing balance of power dynamics at global, regional, and sub-regional levels have contributed to the rise of two small states of the Gulf. At the global level, Qatar and the UAE have benefited from the economic growth of Asia countries, in particular China, by setting up lucrative commercial ties especially in the energy sector. This power transition has allowed economic and security diversification for the Gulf states (Ulrichsen, 2012, pp. 3-7).

At the regional level, there is a process that the center of power has gradually shifted toward the Gulf states from the traditional powerhouse of the Middle East. Since the fall of the Nasserism and the oil price crises, the regional balance of power in the MENA has tilted in favor of the oil-rich Gulf states (Ehteshami A. , 2013, pp. 35-36). In this vein, in process, the economic power of the Gulf states has transformed into political, military, cultural power so that their influence outweighed the others in the region, which is described “Gulfization of the Arab World” (Jones, Porter, & Valeri, 2018), “Gulf Moment” (Gaub, 2015, pp. 14-29), and “Gulfization of the Middle East Security Complex” (Yossef, 2020) in the academic world. Moreover, Karen Young (2014) underscores another shift within the GCC leadership. She argues that third generational leadership has passed to Qatar and the UAE thanks to their role in the energy sector, financial liberalization attempts, and leadership features (p. 114).

In a nutshell, the power dynamics at different levels have constituted the ground on which the UAE and Qatar have taken advantage of the structural shifts by resorting to distinct tools and strategies. As Emma Soubrier (2016) underlines that they are exceptional cases that challenge the traditional pre-acceptances about small powers security strategies of influence versus autonomy. They have managed to sustain a delicate mix of influence and autonomy owing to multilevel hedging strategies. In this context, it is safe to claim that the UAE and Qatar were the rising regional powers before the Arab Spring. This was the result of permissive international and regional circumstances, on the one hand, and domestic characteristics and policies of these countries, on the other hand. The Arab Spring-led change has accelerated these processes and intensified policy activism and interventionism of Qatar and the UAE

across the region. To put it differently, the power accumulation in different forms has underpinned the assertive foreign policy reactions of the UAE and Qatar to the Arab Spring.

#### **4.2.1. Dependent Variable: Detecting the Scope of Reactions**

The Arab Spring is an important breaking point for both Qatar and the UAE. The process has demonstrated that they are “no longer merely managing smallness but seeking to overcome it” (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020, pp. 2-3). Thus, they deeply and proactively engaged with regional politics to shape the unfolding event in accordance with their preferences. As illustrated and detailed in previous chapters, what are common in their reactions is that, first of all, the degree of their involvement with the regional politics is far beyond their prior foreign policy orientation and capacity of small powers. Secondly, they adopted deeply interventionist policies in terms of economic, military, and politics to secure their interests. Lastly, they resorted to similar foreign policy tools in their policy implementations such as arms and financial supports for their proxies, prioritizing personal-level connections in operations.

Despite these similarities and being subject to the same structural forces, interestingly, Qatar and the UAE responded differently to the Arab Spring-led regional change. As elaborated second and third chapters, Qatar took side with the revolutionary wave in favor of the regional change in a pragmatic and opportunist way in order to locate itself into the new regional power configuration as a pioneer state under the revisionist block. On the other hand, the UAE positioned itself with counter-revolutionary powers block not only for balancing its perceived threats stemming from the wave of change but also for pursuing its quest for power.

This kind of positioning and alliance choice in response to the regional change is well-suited with Schweller’s (1994) ‘balance of interest theory’ through which he attempts to explain states’ responses to threats and opportunities via alliance choices. Schweller (1994) explains the theory by focusing on the compatibility of the political goals of the political actors while deciding to form alignment. Over the compatible interests and political goals, which are defined as a conclusion of actors’ calculation of its relative interests in the values of revision and the status quo, actors determine their

position. For instance, while satisfied powers take a status quo position, dissatisfied powers take a revisionist position by deciding their alignment decisions.

So, within this framework, we can define Qatar's revisionist/revolutionary position under bandwagoning behavior motivated by making gains and positive inducements in response to opportunity within the revisionist block. However, this bandwagoning is not a simple act as following a more superior state for profit, but 'wave of the future bandwagoning' that is driven by a dynamic and promising leader or ideology (Schweller, 1994, pp. 96-97). The Arab Spring is this sort of dynamic wave of revolutionary change across the region likely to displace the status quo. What Qatar did is that it put its bet on the possible victory of the uprisings in a revisionist way for the future gains and being on the right side of history since it had a wide scope of action without restraints and ability to take this risk for more favorable regional order. In other words, Qatar bandwagoned with the overall direction of the change for a new regional order which was on the verge of a transformation from the present status-quo to a new democratic and Islamist one.

On the other hand, the UAE's policies have been motivated by both perceived threats and opportunistic power projection. Therefore, its reaction is balancing policy under the status quo alliance in order to overcome the Arab Spring-related threats and preserve what it has, but also to extend its regional sphere of influence under the specific regional vision of authoritarian-secular regime type that has operationalized within counter-revolutionary politics.

In this context, these two states' alliance decisions, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, in the post-2011 era have driven by the compatibility of political goals with other states. The logic behind their positions residing at the edges of the opposite regional blocks is that the value of revisionism outweighs the value of the status quo in the case of Qatar and vice-versa in the case of the UAE. So, their state interests are determined between these lines and operationalized in the field. So, the questions here are why is the interest of the Qatari state determined around revisionism while the UAE's interest is sided with the status quo? Why do the states evaluate the same structural variable differently?

The reasons and dynamics behind these different reactions to the same phenomenon are the main problems of this chapter. Besides their degree of reactions as small states, there is another puzzling question that this chapter must shed light on: Why did the two so similar small states of Qatar and the UAE take conflicting positions as a reaction to the Arab Spring?

### **4.3. Explaining the Logic of Divergent Policy Preferences**

#### **4.3.1. Theoretical Framework**

The Middle East region has unique characteristics distinguishing it from other regions and they must be considered in working on foreign policies of Middle East states. Given that reason, Raymond Hinnesbusch (2014c) tries to grasp international relations of the Middle East states through the term of ‘complex realism’ in which some realist arguments, which are a struggle for power and countering threats for the survival of the state, are pervasive but also the others are problematic because of the facts that the states in the region are not commonly cohesive, foreign policy of the states prioritizes the regime interests over national interest, the states operate in the multilayered environment and they are affected by transnational identities and the global hierarchy.

In addition to these, particularly in the Persian Gulf region, externally constituted unusual and artificial state formations process, rich hydrocarbon resources with rentier states, the regional divide between monarchies and republics, and salient tribalism, all of these, make the foreign policy of the Gulf states more complex and multilayered (Rickli & Almezaini, 2017, pp. 21-23). As highly underscored by Gause (2009), the salience of transnational identities is the most striking feature of the Middle East region and the Gulf sub-regional states system. That’s why the gulf states act according to more ‘perceived threats’ than the balance of power considerations for their domestic stability and regime survival by calculating the interrelated nature of internal and external matters. In other words, they assess structural and external changes and formalize their security and foreign policy agenda through the lens of threat perception for their regime security, which is the result of the intersection of ideational and material factors. Due to the regime type and rentier state logic, personal politics is dominant in the Gulf. Agendas and preferences of the leaders and small circle of ruling

elites determine foreign policy formation; therefore, leader level explanations must be taken into account in foreign policy analysis of the Gulf states (Gause III F. , 2015). So, as highly addressed in the literature, in the Middle East, the foreign policy is constituted by the interaction of different levels and regime security is the primary driver of the foreign policy (Hinnebush & Ehteshami, 2014a; Korany & Dessouki, 2008). All these features indicate that, as Steven Wright (2011) writes “a multilevel and multicontextual analysis must be adopted in analyzing the foreign policies of GCC states” (p. 93).

In this regard, neoclassical realism provides quite an explanatory framework to analyze these multilevel intersections between the international and domestic realms. Neoclassical realism aims to combine the systemic imperatives and unit-level variables to explain states' foreign policies by focusing on the complex relationships between those levels (Rose, 1998). By doing this, it does not ignore classical realism's pre-acceptances about state-society relations and neorealism's structuralist approach in international relations. As a combination of these two theories, it emphasizes the importance of unit-level domestic inputs, such as elite perceptions, perceived threats, and constraints, as an intervening variable in the assessment of structural dynamics and foreign policy reactions to these dynamics (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009, pp. 4-13). Since the states are not a coherent mechanic organization, “elite consensus, government or regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elites and elite cohesion” influence the state's response to systemic imperatives. They cannot always properly act according to the balance of power or threat theories, this situation is theorized by Schweller as “underbalancing” (Schweller, 2004).

Kenneth Waltz's (1979) systemic theory explores the structure of international politics. As a deep structure, anarchy has a constructive role in international politics in which security is a primary incentive for the states to survive. To this end, relative power accumulation is the only way. Based on this structure, he explains some important and big continuities and patterns in international politics. Therefore, Waltz's theory has a powerful explanatory and predictive capacity in the long-term. On the other hand, in the short-term, states generally cannot effectively respond to the threats or systemic changes they face, since unit-level variables are an important input in the process of evaluation, decision-making, resource extraction, and timing for

determining foreign policy. To put it differently, systemic incentives and constraints push the states to react in a specific way, instead of determining it. This does not mean that the states always act in this way. Therefore, to explain the deviations from neorealism's predictions domestic politics and ideas must be taken into account. That's why Rathbun (2008) accepts that "neoclassical realism is the logical outgrowth of neorealism" (p. 297).

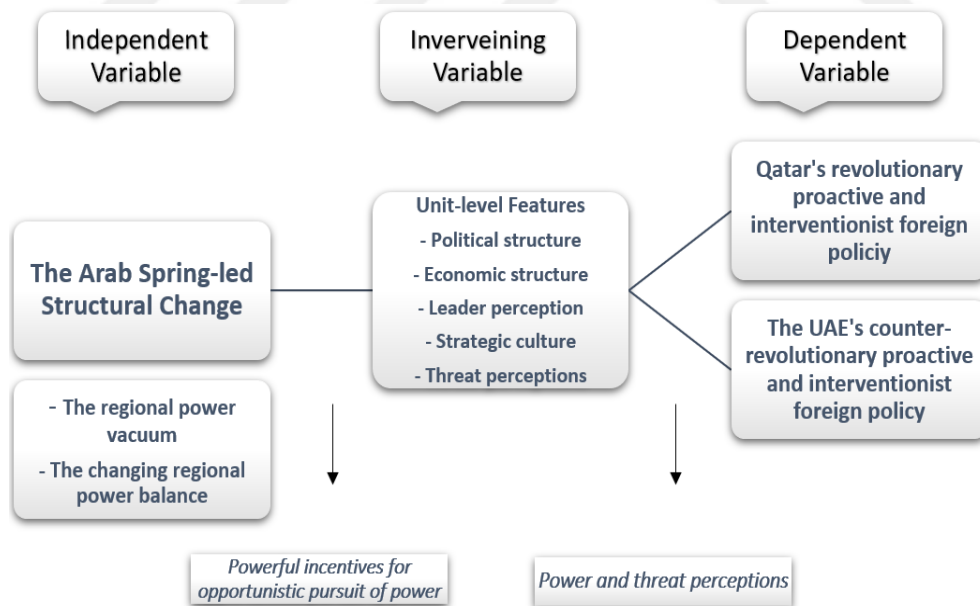
Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016) extend the scope of neoclassical realism in their last book, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. They formulize the theory under three types: Type I explains deviations from the appropriate responses to the systemic opportunities and threats. Beyond the anomalies, Type II explains broader types of foreign policy and strategic responses to the structural environment. Type III is the neoclassical theory of international politics. In the broadest sense, it focuses on the explanation of changes and outcomes in the international systemic level. To explain these dependent variables, neoclassical realism operationalizes unit-level intervening variables, which consist of leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions in the assessments of structural systemic environment and determination and mobilization of possible reaction to it.

Neoclassical realism takes as a baseline the following ground-points of structural realism: "(1) that the international system is anarchic and, consequently, that states must rely on themselves to ensure their survival; (2) that survival is the most important national interest in an anarchic realm; and (3) that anarchy makes cooperation difficult, as it leads states to prefer relative over absolute gains" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 179). Departing from these essential points, neoclassical realism adopts a top-down standpoint and domestic variables only have a secondary impact on the determination of the foreign policy response to the systemic incentives and constraints. This mechanism can be best put by Rathbun's (2008) words: "The anarchic environment is primarily but indirectly causal while the policy-making process is secondarily but directly causal" (p. 306).

As a result, by focusing on this kind of internal characteristic of the states, neoclassical realism tries to explain different types of foreign policies of the states as a response to similar structural forces, threats and opportunities, by adding the state-society relations

and elite perceptions to the analysis, which means is to open ‘the black box’ of the state (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009, p. 23). In other words, “(n)eoclassical realism posits an imperfect “transmission belt” between systemic incentives and constraints, on the one hand, and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies states select, on the other” (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009, p. 4).

In conclusion, given those abovementioned complexities shaping the foreign policy formation in the region and the contrasting reactions of Qatar and the UAE’s to the same structural variable despite their similarities under the same regional and sub-regional system, neoclassical realism is the most convenient framework to explain their different types of assessments and level of reactions by resorting to leader-level calculations, threat perceptions, domestic political structure, and state-society relations. Also, as Rickli and Almezaini argue (2017) that neoclassical realism provides a well-suited framework to study small states foreign and security policies because of its middle way approach integrating domestic and structural explanations.



**Table 4.1: Mechanism of Qatar and the UAE’s reactions to the Arab Spring<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> This schema is prepared according to neoclassical realist foreign policy model developed by Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, see (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 31)

In this context, Table 1 indicates the summary of following arguments in this chapter. I take the Arab Spring-led change as an independent and systemic variable that primarily directed and enabled these two states' foreign policy assertiveness and interventionism. And these structural forces have been canalized by domestic-level transmission belt, which shaped the reactions of Qatar and the UAE in a particular way

I argue that the Arab Spring-led change as a structural force has made room for these two small gulf states' power projections in the Middle East. Prior power balance trends were already in favor of these states as well. So, boosted by their wealth and well-suited positions, Qatar and the UAE reacted to this change with a high degree of assertive opportunism. At first, their role in the overthrowing of the Gaddafi regime and oppressing the uprising in Bahrain are early signs of their interventionism for the sake of their interest. In the subsequent process, they have continued their interventionist policies in many countries by acting like full-fledged regional powers. But these policies have been conducted under two clashing regional power axes. As consistent with the overall regional circumstances and atmosphere, whereas Qatari revolutionism was at its peak during the first phase of the Arab Spring (2011-2013), the UAE's counter-revolutionary politics has come to a head since 2013.

In spite of commonalities in their reactions exceeding the traditional molds of smallness, their opposing revolutionary and counterrevolutionary positions are the product of the assessment of the Arab Spring-led change by their domestic-level features. In their responses to the systemic pressures or threats, leader images, domestic structure/institutions, state-society relations, strategic culture, and threat perceptions constitute restrictions and opportunities in states' foreign policy formations. These domestic variables interact with structural dynamics and explain different types and levels of responses to similar external changes. In this line of reasoning, domestic features and elites' characteristics are the main distinguishing factors that direct reactions of Qatar and the UAE to the external environment in accordance with their threat and opportunity perceptions.

#### **4.3.2. Power Vacuum and Changing Balance of Power as a Structural Force**

As discussed and claimed by many, the Arab Spring-led change has further complicated the existing unstable regional order. The ideological and power multipolarity; intensified power competition of regional powers; eroding the US hegemony and increased involvement of other global powers, Russia, China, and EU in the region; collapsing the state authorities in Yemen, Syria, Libya; the proliferation of non-state violent actors; and multi-actors involved in proxy wars, all of these changes altered the regional geopolitical equations and deepened regional fault lines around new forms of enmity and amity by adding new layers of conflict and instability in the region since 2011 (Kamrava, 2018a; Kausch, 2015; Del Sarto, Malmvig, & Lecha, 2019).

As it is touched upon in previous chapters, the US' mixed and selective reactions to the Arab Spring coinciding with its less interventionist regional policy under the Obama administration have created a sort of regional power vacuum (Pinto, 2012). The US was the hegemonic power of the Middle East orchestrating regional international relations according to its interests through the strong military presence and elite-level connections. That's why Raymond Hinnebusch (2014b) defines the 1990-2010 era as the US hegemony. Therefore, this retrenchment of the US allowed the formation of a power vacuum that has been exploited by both other global powers as Russia and regional powers of the Middle East (Kamrava, 2018a; Kausch, 2015).

In addition to this, the fall of prominent powers of the region as a result of the uprisings and deadlocked transition processes by civil wars intensified this power vacuum. So, the change of regional power balance and configuration in such a situation has triggered assertive and interventionist policy embracement of the Gulf states for not only exploiting the vacuum for their regional power projection and penetration but also for overcoming the new threats and security problems posed by the Arab Spring by taking care of themselves (Rickli & Almezaini, 2017, pp. 2-4). In other words, in this "competitive multipolarity" (Kausch, 2015), the events have forced the pace of ongoing shifting in the regional balance of power in favor of the Gulf states, in particular, the UAE and Qatar.

Therefore, the Arab Spring-led change has deepened the regional power vacuum and changed the regional balance of power. These structural changes and the relative retrenchment of the region's hegemonic power have intensified the regional power competition. Under the circumstance that is identified around favoring relative power capacities, lack of other relevant states' resisting capabilities, and catching the possible short and convenient momentum, the system can send clear signals of opportunities for power enhancement (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 47). In this regard, in the post-2011 era, the systemic environment was permissive for Qatar and the UAE pushing them to conduct power-driven expansionist and pro-active foreign policies. As a result, it can be claimed that the Arab Spring-led change has created powerful incentives for the regional states to conduct a foreign policy which is driven by power-maximization impetus. Because power is the key term for both taking advantage of the regional change in an opportunistic way and balancing threats stemming from the changes in a situation that self-help understanding was enforced. The pursuit of power is the central goal of Qatar and the UAE. That's why, in this work, I take the Arab Spring-led change as an independent and systemic variable that primarily directed and enabled these two states' foreign policy assertiveness and interventionism. These structural forces have canalized by domestic-level transmission belt, which shaped the reactions of Qatar and the UAE in a particular way: They operationalized their goals within different revisionist and status quo alignments.

#### **4.3.3. Unit-Level as an Intervening Variable**

To grasp the difference in their orientations to the same structural variable is possible only by taking domestic level variables into consideration. So, neoclassical realism is the most suitable theory to explain divergent foreign policy reactions since the domestic realm functions in this theory as a transmission belt for the structural factors. Under the same international structure, the domestic realm is the key variable to explain the distinct foreign policy reactions of the UAE and Qatar to the one external constant: the Arab Spring.

In this context, under a neoclassical realist framework, leader images, domestic structure/institutions, state-society relations and strategic culture, all of these unit-level features constitute a transmission belt through which Qatar and the UAE assessed the

Arab Spring-led change and responded according to these power and threat assessments. As formulized by Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016), these four unit-level factors have also intertwined with each other rather than being just ad hoc solutions. In this vein,

(p)erception is affected not only by international factors, but also by leader images and strategic culture. Both decision making and policy implementation are conditioned domestically by strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic political institutions (p. 60).

So, I argue that these unit-level variables have the ability not only to explain the differences in their reactions under contradictory poles, but also to enlighten how these two small gulf states reacted to the change with such a high degree of assertiveness and interventionism.

#### **4.3.3.1. Domestic-Structure**

Despite a great deal of resemblances between the GCC states in many aspects of facilitating their policy coordination, there are considerable differences that push them to dissimilar policy implementations. As Ehteshami (2015) states “their different leaderships, social bases and geography have dictated their own conditions on these countries’ foreign policies, and therefore, on many occasions, have pushed them in different directions” (p. 18).

This is valid for Qatar and the UAE as well. Although the similarities are many in terms of demographic, geographic, social, and economic features as convergence dynamics, their political structures are different. Having a more homogenous population, territory, and centralized politics without considerable restrains for the ruling elites, Qatar’s unitary monarchical system is a key enabler its degree of policy assertiveness and position in response to the Arab Spring. In the words of Ehteshami (2013), “Qatar is a prime example where civil society’s appetite for political change is negligible, given the high standard of living and wealth enjoyed by it small population” (p. 138). This is the main enabler of its power and opportunity perception regarding the Arab Spring paving the way for its assertive and risk-taking policies.

But things work differently in Emirati politics. One of the peculiar characteristics distinguishing the UAE from neighboring states is, that Emirati politics are a consequence of the federal state structure (Young K. E., 2013, p. 17). This means, in critical issues, the policy implementations must be decided by taking into account the whole emirates' policy preferences. Even de facto power is held and overall foreign policy direction is formalized by, substantially, Abu Dhabi and, lesser extent, Dubai, they oversee the entire country's stability and coherence. In this regard, as David Roberts explains, varied attitudes and vulnerabilities of the emirates shape the foreign policy articulation of the UAE. As mentioned in the former chapter, the UAE's Arab Spring policy is highly affected by three matters that are derived from the federalist system, relative heterogeneous, and unequal socio-economic structures in the domestic realm. The first one is unequal wealth distribution and development levels between the Emirates, which constitutes a ground for grievances and a need for a delicate balance between rich and poor. Related with this issue, the second is contradictory attitudes towards political Islam and the MB in the Emirates. The last one is foreign policy disagreements on specific issues such as Iran, manifested itself in a historical event, or different priorities between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. These are important structural constraints and vulnerabilities shaping the rulers' decisions in foreign policy implementations. All of these constitute vulnerabilities that have to be considered in the ruler's policy calculations and reactions to the external forces as the Arab Spring. Therefore, these parameters set the general frame in which the leader-level preferences operate. Thus, as a conclusion of these two levels' interaction, the UAE's response to the Arab Spring can be explained (Roberts D. , 2017a, pp. 551-557).

So, threatened by the Arab Spring, the regime security was at stake in the Gulf. However, in domestic politics, Qatar has a more solid and consolidated environment than the UAE; therefore, any possibility of disruption of stability at home would trigger a legitimacy crisis so as to undermine the regime security in the UAE more than Qatar. That's why Qatar conducted a more distinctive policy from the GCC consensus while the UAE committed itself to it in a more integrative way (Soubrier, 2016, p. 139).

In short, these relative differences gave shape to leaders' strategic and political visions and the states' threat perceptions so as to canalize their different assessments of the Arab Spring. On the other hand, similarities in domestic politics can also explain their

unexpected and unpredictable level of assertiveness and interventionism as small states in the post-2011 period. Neoclassical realism widens the concept of power by incorporating domestic politics and ideas which highly affect the states' resource extraction and mobilization abilities in response to systemic pressures, as Taliaferro (2006) states. Schweller (2004) explains the state's responses to the external environment by resorting to "elite consensus, government or regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elite cohesion." These factors determine the states' willingness and ability to respond to an external threat and opportunity in a proper way. For example, as a combination of these variables, the high degree of state coherence underpins an appropriate reaction (p. 169). In this vein, oil and gas-driven wealthiness, the small size of populations, and clear autonomy in favor of the small circle of ruling elites stemming from authoritarian and rentier regime type constitute the uniqueness of the UAE and Qatar states. Merged with the abovementioned ongoing external trends and changing nature of power in favor of these states, these unit-level features clarify the willingness and abilities, in terms of resource extraction and mobilization, of Doha and Abu Dhabi in their response to the Arab Spring beyond the traditional molds of small states. In other words, their quick and intense responses fostered by both opportunities and threats to the strategic stimuli are rooted in regime features.

#### **4.3.3.2. Leader-Level theorizing**

Leaders stand in a crucial position in foreign policy formation processes; therefore, their beliefs and visions, which are shaped by political understanding, strategic instrumental reasoning, and friend-enemy distinction, have an important impact in the assessment of external dynamics, especially in short-term reactions (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, pp. 61-66). In the Gulf, this impact is so much greater than others due to the personalized characteristic of politics. There is a strong emphasis on the significance of leader-level theorizing in the foreign policy analysis of the Gulf states (Wright, 2011; Gause III F. , 2015), in general, and Qatar and the UAE, in particular (Roberts D. , 2017a; Kamrava, 2013; Ulrichsen, 2017a). Therefore, personal characteristics, visions, threat perceptions, and regime security-obsessed interests of the leaders and their small circle of advisers in these countries have a great impact on the foreign policy formations. Emma Soubrier (2016) conceptualizes this condition of Qatar and the UAE around 'the prince state' notion in which "individuals have not just

replaced institutions. They have become institutions” (p. 131). Of course, leaders’ world-views develop according to limitations and enablers of the social, economic, and political environments (Roberts D. , 2017a, p. 550).

As highlighted by many, political visions and threat and opportunity perceptions of Hamad and MbZ have determined their countries’ foreign policy on the verge of the Arab Spring-led regional change (Roberts D. , 2017a; Soubrier, 2016; Krieg, 2019). MbZ and his security-centered approach constitute the backbone of the UAE’s oppressive reaction to the Arab Spring in inside and outside (Ulrichsen, 2019, p. 29). The UAE’s reactionary position to the Arab Spring has emerged as a result of the enhanced influences of Iran and political Islam, particularly, the MB across the region. This is because of the fact that MbZ and inner circle perceive these two as the key security threats not only for internal security but also for the regional status quo. Especially, securitization of the MB as a facilitator of radicalism and the mortal enemy is a product of MbZ’s politics and preferences. This can be traced as of his early days of reign under the 9/11 pressures (Salisbury, 2020, pp. 13-17). Furthermore, MbZ’s security obsession around militaristic implementations to fulfill his regional political vision, which rests on the organization of regional policy around militaristic and secular autocratic regimes, (Krieg, 2019a, pp. 93-97) not only purpose to overcome the perceived threats but also an extension of the UAE’s political sphere of influence. Since the changing balance of power within the UAE in favor of Abu Dhabi against Dubai, political desires have been included in its economy-based overcoming strategy in order to develop a political role backing the Emirati’s economic aspirations which are being geo-economic power connecting the global trade via strategic ports and financial centers under MbZ’ command (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020, pp. 14-15).

In his biographical essay, Robert F. Worth analyzes MbZ’s political vision, which is driven by the rise of Islamist factions and regional turmoil, for the region and UAE. He summarizes the steps of execution of this vision.

M.B.Z. had already hatched an immensely ambitious plan to reshape the region’s future. He would soon enlist as an ally Mohammed bin Salman, the young Saudi crown prince known as M.B.S., who in many ways is M.B.Z.’s protégé. Together, they helped the Egyptian military depose that country’s elected Islamist president in 2013. In Libya in 2015, M.B.Z. stepped into the civil war, defying a United Nations embargo and American diplomats. He fought the Shabab militia in Somalia, leveraging his country’s commercial ports to become a power broker in

the Horn of Africa. He joined the Saudi war in Yemen to battle the Iran-backed Houthi militia. In 2017, he broke an old tradition by orchestrating an aggressive embargo against his Persian Gulf neighbor Qatar (Worth, 2020).

As it is elaborated in the second chapter, the main architect of today's well-knowing Qatar is Hamad. By contrast with MbZ, Hamad's vision for enhancing Qatar's regional influence through state-branding, soft-power, and international relations, and hedging strategies led him to see the Arab Spring as an opportunity. Since, in a broader picture, the overall direction of the region fueled by the uprisings was consistent with Hamad's strategic discourse branding Qatar as an innovative, modern, and liberal, but not in terms of political, state of the region (Krieg, 2019a, pp. 93-100). So, Qatar's pursuit of power and status in the Arab Spring are directly related to Hamad's ability, vision, calculations, and preferences.

In the case of the MB, in consequence of these clashing characteristics, MbZ assessed the MB "as a liability" needs to be defeated whereas Sheikh Hamad assessed it "as an asset" needs to be manipulated to manage the change in favor of the Qatari interest (Roberts D. , 2017a, p. 545).

#### **4.3.3.3. Strategic Culture and Foreign and Security Policy Orientations**

Since their independence, Qatar and the UAE's foreign policies have aimed to overcome their smallness with limited power capacities to secure their sovereignty and improve their influence and autonomy against Iran and Saudi Arabia in a troubled region. Under this same strategic goal, they have adopted different pathways. While the UAE prioritizes the economy around which it built a leading position in its international relations, Qatar puts first political sovereignty in its diplomatic effort (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020).

From a neoclassical realist standpoint, Emma Soubrier (2016) also investigates and compares these two countries' foreign and security policies. She addresses the significance of domestic and leader-level theorizing in response to structural international circumstances. As conceptualized by Soubrier, the UAE and Qatar internalize dissimilar security/survival strategies with different priorities, which is

shaped by the rulers' perception and imagination about their countries. But, for the same purpose, "to keep the world interested in them in order to survive" (Soubrier, 2016, p. 132).

In general, while the UAE make its emphasis on independent hard-power development, Qatar's focus is soft-power-centered. Thus, "the Emiratis defended an idea of credibility with a focus on state-building, turned towards the domestic front, the Qataris defended an idea of legitimacy with a focus on state-branding, turned towards the international front" (Soubrier, 2016, p. 129). In this vein, the implemented strategic cultures have varied as well. The majority of the UAE's emphasis is on "autonomy and a defensive strategy", while Qatar's is on "influence and cooperation strategy" (Soubrier, 2016, p. 130).

In this context, besides some ruptures from policy implementations of the prior-2011 period, as Soubrier (2016) claims, there is more continuity than change in their security strategies in the Arab Spring. As in the case of the UAE, the enhancements in hard-power capacities, gaining credibility from the Western partners, manifested itself in NATO's Libya operations, policies aimed to preserve stability in the domestic front underpin the continuity argument. Likewise, Qatar's Arab Spring policy can be also evaluated as a continuation of its two traditional security strategies: eschewing from Saudis' sphere of influence and building a new alliance of networks. These are motivated by the pursuit of legitimacy and influence around state-branding for the international front.

Besides these continuities, the prior particular security orientations and strategic culture are critical input in the interpretation of the Arab Spring for Qatar and the UAE. As argued by Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016), strategic culture affects the states' perception of and adaptation to structural changes. This effect could be both restrictive and permissive for the states' reactions to systemic opportunities and threats. In this line of reasoning, it can be argued that prior specific policy orientations and strategic culture are essential intervening components that directed these countries' foreign policies in the post-2011 era.

Qatar's outward-oriented and soft-power based strategy focusing on to differentiate itself from authoritarian counterparts in the international arena serve to the assessment of the Arab Spring as a historical moment to realize this strategy in an opportunist and influential way. As noted in the second chapter, the assertive support of Qatar for democratic transition within its Islamist form in many countries was facilitated due to its previous political baggage that was in a similar pathway with the Arab Spring. Therefore, at one point, it can be claimed that the Qatari opportunism is a consequence of its long-established security and foreign policy strategies which aim to secure the state of Qatar through international relations.

The other way around, inward-looking and state-building centered security strategies prioritizing defensive strategic culture differently directed the UAE's reaction to the Arab Spring. Abu Dhabi's threat perception has peaked during the process. It interpreted the events through the lens of domestic security and stability by overseeing the balance and vulnerabilities between other emirates. It has also developed its hard-power capabilities. Therefore, the UAE prioritized to balance the threats targeting its security in domestic-regional nexus. So, as in Qatar, the UAE's previous policy orientations affected its assessments of the Arab Spring-led change.

In conclusion, it can be rightly contended that developed by the intersection of domestic structures and elite-level features, the determined pathway of security and foreign policies of Qatar and the UAE had a great impact on their reactions to the Arab Spring. These policies molded their threat and opportunity perceptions and enabled their foreign policy adaptations. Therefore, path-dependency has a noteworthy explanatory power to explain these states' different reactions.

#### **4.3.3.4. Threat Perceptions**

There is a consensus in the literature that regime security is the core concern driving acts of the Gulf states. They articulate their alliance decisions and foreign policies for the sake of regime survival and security calculations (Wright, 2011; Ehteshami A. , 2015). So, in these states, as a "regime security and national security (are evaluated) as two sides of the same coin" (Ulrichsen, 2019, p. 21).

If this consensus is taken for granted, another major and related question must be answered: How do states identify threats in the Middle East? F. Gregory Gause III (2003) attempts to find a proper response to this question in his article “Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf” by investigating historical examples. Initially, he puts the existing literature in a context by examining the arguments of Stephen Walt (1987), Steven David (1991), and Michael Barnett (1996) on the determination and prioritization of threats. According to Gause’s (2003) readings, David claims that regime security is the main motivation in the Third World states’ threat perception and alliance decisions to overcome these internal and external threats under the term of ‘omnibalancing’. Similarly, Barnett focuses on ideational and identity-based threats to regime security. In his balance of threat theory, Walt underlines ‘geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions’ as a determining factor of threat perception. In light of these discussions and historical pieces of evidence, both material and ideational factors are important in the detection of threats. So, “external challenges to their domestic legitimacy and security, based upon transnational ideological platforms of Islam and pan-Arabism, as being more serious than threats based simply upon a preponderance of military capabilities” (Gause III F. G., 2003, p. 303).

In conclusion, because of the fact that the stake is too high in the continuation of the rentier-dynastic status quo inside. For the Gulf states, threat perceptions to the regime security and stability whether it is material or ideological are the key impetus that fuels their external behaviors. Lobell (2009) notes that these threat assessments, which shape the foreign policies in response to the systemic environment, are products of the multilevel framework of systemic, sub-systemic, and domestic ingredients. In this regard, in states that this kind of regime-centric approach to security and threat prevails, domestic vulnerabilities and the ruling elites’ perceptions have a reciprocal and essential impact in the identification of threats and security issues, as Cinzia Bianco (2018) argues. In short, it is safe to argue that threat perception is more related to the regime security rather than state.

As stressed above, the power accumulation of these two states, changing regional balance of power, and the Arab Spring-led power vacuum, all of these are structural context that has enabled both Qatar and the UAE’s assertive, proactive, and

interventionist foreign policies during the Arab Spring. These factors can explain these similarities in their reactions such as their degree of involvement with regional politics. Encouraged by these factors, the UAE and Qatar have desired to achieve similar goals: to enhance their regional penetration and power projection but in very opposite camps. So, to explain their revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions, their threat and opportunity perceptions relating to the Arab Spring and its consequences must be taken into account.

Driven by varied domestic considerations and leader-level preferences, different threat perceptions have a crucial explanatory role and capacity in the GCC states' changing and contradictory foreign policies in response to the Arab Spring (Odinius & Kuntz, 2015, p. 644; Ulrichsen, 2019). Shaped by domestic structures and leaders' preferences, differences in threat and opportunity perceptions on the revolutionary change, political Islam, and positions of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are the main element in Qatar and the UAE's reactions to the Arab Spring. For instance, David Roberts (2017a) explains the opposite reactions of Qatar and the UAE to the Arab Spring around their threat and opportunity perceptions on the rise of the MB.

#### **4.3.3.4.1. Threat Perceptions and the MB**

As comprehensively explained in the previous chapters, the MB and other Islamist factions rose from the ashes of the Arab Spring as the new political actors of the region, which eventually shaped the polarized regional politics of Qatar and the UAE. Since 2011, political Islam has been a core reference point ordering regional politics. As a result of calculated threat and power perceptions regarding the political Islam, the regional order and alliance formations have been organized by the regional states (Dihstelhoff & Lohse, 2020).

As elaborated in the third chapter, by reasons of domestic vulnerabilities fostered by federal state structure and socio-economic inequalities; historical experiences; political and economic system; the ruling elites' preferences and visions the UAE has perceived the Islamist politics, in a concrete sense the MB, as an existential threat for its domestic stability, security, and legitimacy and also for the regional order. So, any possibility of the spread of revolutionary uprisings and the MB-led export of revolution

have deepened the ruling elites' fear of regime security because they knew that there is a ground for Arab Spring-like change inside. As the MbZ complains even in 2006 "if an election were held tomorrow, the [UAE] Muslim Brotherhood would win" (Fenton-Harvey, 2020). This kind of threat perception is the engine of the UAE's counter-revolutionary regional politics.

On the other hand, Qatar already had well-cultivated relations with the MB resting on a mutual benefit ground. Qatar saw the MB and its extended networks as leverage in the domestic arena to improve its education system and to balance Saudi Wahhabi influence and to take advantage of the organization's capacity in its international reach.

Contrary to the UAE, this relation founded on Hamad's ability on controlling and ensuring the organization's outward extension and domestic political quietism of small and homogenous population. Given these reasons, Qatar's perception of the rise of the MB in a new regional context has been driven by its opportunistic pursuit of power quest over the various Islamist actors.

In his comparison, David Roberts (2017a) concludes that differences in political structures and elite-level features created distinct types of experiences and threat perceptions on the MB, which eventually triggered an opposed and conflicting policy formulation in the Arab Spring.

Different state structures in Qatar and the UAE created antithetical experiences for the elites with the Muslim Brotherhood: in the UAE, Islah came to be seen as a threat, but in Qatar these links were an asset. However, this case study highlights that, while differing contexts are set by second image phenomena (domestic structure), the specific shape of policies ultimately stems from the proclivities of the leaders themselves (Roberts D. , 2017a, p. 550).

#### **4.3.3.4..2. Threat Perceptions and Iran**

In a similar way, a combination of domestic vulnerabilities and elite-level preferences foster threat perceptions of the UAE and Qatar against Iran. Doha has more nuanced and stable relations with Iran, which hinges on geopolitically-forced mutual economic pragmatism. Sharing the world's largest natural gas field, North Field, compels Qatar to maintain more balanced relations with Iran so as to not jeopardize its production and export abilities. Another dimension of Doha and Tehran relations is Qatar's

hedging strategy that aims to balance Saudi Arabia's power. So, even if Doha is not on the same page on several regional issues, especially after 2011 as in the example of Syria, it makes a strong emphasis on economic pragmatism that drives their relations (Boussois, 2019). Also, differently from the UAE, Qatar's Shia population is relatively more integrated within the socio-economic life (Kamrava, 2013). These factors constitute the main differences shaping the Qatari perception, far from being obsessed with security threats, relating to Iran issue differently from the UAE.

As stressed above, on the one hand, the presence of Shia and Iranian diaspora, on the other hand, historical conflicting experiences of the emirates regarding Iran as a threat or economic partner, and the fact of the occupied island, Abu Dhabi saw Iran's ideological, military, and political expansionism amid the Arab Spring-led turmoil as a serious security threat. In addition to domestic security considerations, Abu Dhabi's threat perception has mostly driven by this intensified regional activities and influence of Iran across the region (Bianco, 2019). Therefore, the UAE has jumped on the Saudi bandwagon in the securitization of Iran on all fronts (Boussois, 2019, pp. 222-223).

#### **4.3.3.4.3. Threat Perceptions and Relational Dynamics with the US and Saudi Arabia**

Given the smallness and limited resources, small states tend to find a more powerful partner for their survival and security. Therefore, alliance-building is the best way for small states' protection and independence. It also affects their foreign policy formations (Galal, 2020, pp. 39-42). In this line of reasoning, alliance relations and small states' role in these relations are significant inputs in foreign policy calculations of these states. For a long time, the small GCC states have been under “(the) US and Saudi-led security umbrella” (Krieg, 2019b, p. 17). So, Saudi Arabia and the US are the two main security partners and allies of Qatar and the UAE against external threats; therefore, as a structural force, their nature and dynamics of relations with these powers have affected their reactions to the Arab Spring.

#### 4.3.3.4.4. The United States of America

The US is the long-term security guarantor of both Qatar and the UAE. It has provided the required protection through military bases, security agreements, and provision of high-tech military equipment. Under the US's security umbrella, they have managed to survive in troubled times. In addition to deterrence function against the expansionist desires of Iran and Iraq, the well-entrenched economic, diplomatic, and military relations with the US have served as an escape channel from Saudi domination for Qatar and the UAE as well.

Given these reasons, the US's regional policy puts the overall framework in which the foreign policies of Qatar and the UAE usually operate harmoniously with this. In other words, it can be claimed that the US's position, whether in favor or against, in these countries' policy calculations and formations is one of the most crucial factors. That's why detection of how the US responded to the Arab Spring is a necessary milestone in the analysis of our cases.

The US's Arab Spring policy is a product of the tension that arises from the dilemmas between its idealism pushing it to support democratic transformation and its realism pushing it to protect interests. This tension explains the US selective stance changing across time and cases during the uprisings in the region. While, in some cases as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya, it backed the initial democratic change, in others as Bahrain, it sided with the status quo (Atlas, 2012). In this vein, Daniela Huber (2015) states that early reactions of the US were driven by its opportunistic assessments to support the democratic will of the people, at the same time, to protect its interests and regional security under dual role conception. However, after the September 2012 dramatic terrorist attack on the US's Benghazi Consulate and dead of four American officials, this stance has gradually shifted in favor of the security and interest-oriented one as a result of risky patterns of the process for the US. Thereafter, optimistic, democratic, and freedom themes-centered language of the US officials and Obama about the Arab Spring and region was replaced with violence, terrorism, and conflicts centered one. So, without any full-fledged clear vision and strategy, wobbling between value and interest-based choices, the US responded to the Arab Spring as a pragmatic actor that eschews from any direct and costly intervention.

May Darwich (2019) clarifies the increasing assertiveness and interventionism of the UAE and Qatar in their security and influence quests by resorting to role conception theory. The US role conception perceived by the Gulf states rests on its hegemonic power in the region as a reliable protector of their securities and oil flows. But foreign policy conducts that was determined around these defined and mutually accepted roles have changed as a result of the US's disengagement from the region and the Arab Spring policies. Eventually "(t)he change in the US role has led to a perceived vacuum in the region, and thereby, changed its social structure, which influenced regional actors' role conceptions and behaviour" (p. 25).

The US's initial politically supportive, but confused, stance on the Arab Spring has made possible of Qatari adventurism that supported the revolutionary movements in many countries. It's risky and pioneer role happened owing to the US' politically supportive manner in Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. In this regard, compatibly with the values of the US and Europe, what Qatar wanted to achieve is to put itself in an influential and lucrative position in the possible democratic order by cementing and showing its commitment to the liberal world in accordance with prior state-branding strategy. This Qatari reaction was a conscious product of its main security patron's blessing and approval. Even Obama praised Hamad as a major supporter of democracy in the Middle East (Davidson C. , 2016). This meant that, as Elizabeth Dickson (2014) notes, "the United States gave Doha de facto free rein to do what it wasn't willing to do in the Middle East: intervene." Moreover, Qatar attempted to locate itself as a strategic bridge between the US-Europe and the new ascending Islamist powers of the region by virtue of well-developed relations with both sides.

Military and diplomatic supports of Qatar and also the UAE to NATO's military intervention in Libya in the side of revolutionaries are assessed as a manifestation of their commitments and reliabilities to the Western allies because their presence legitimized NATO's intervention in the eyes of Arab people (Ulrichsen, 2016; Rickli, 2016).

On the contrary, this position of the US challenged the UAE's security by encouraging the regional change posing threats to regime security. This frustration has paved the way for the more assertive and relatively independent foreign policy of the UAE under

the counter-revolutionary strategy. However, Obama's initial policy came to an end in 2013 with the US's acceptance and blessing of the counter-revolutionary coup in Egypt so as to underpin the UAE's regional policies (Khalil, 2016, pp. 294-295). So, Qatar's proactive and supportive Arab Spring policy must be re-calibrated under this changing equation. This means that Qatar's revolutionary activism was replaced by the UAE's counter-revolutionary activism in the following years. By 2016, Trump's politics in the Middle East has also promoted this counter-revolutionary design so as to facilitate the UAE's regional politics.

The essential point is that the US policy is the critical driver of policy positions of Qatar and the UAE, in one way or another, because of their strategic alliance. Therefore, the change in the US's position also substantially affected their policies after 2013. In subsequent years, the US's consent under the changing regional conditions, the proliferation of terrorist groups, the rise of ISIS, civil wars, has underpinned the UAE's position while enforcing Qatar's step back, which was also pushed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as mentioned before.

#### **4.3.3.4..5. Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is the traditional center of power in the GCC in terms of economic, geographic, demographic, religious, and political. In the short but chaotic history of the GCC, the small states generally followed its footprints vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq threats. But, as Szalai (2017) examines that this attitude has changed in the Arab Spring. Their strategies have varied between "accommodation (total acceptance of Saudi leadership) and opportunism (going 'rogue'-challenging or neglecting Saudi security interest)" (p. 4) In this classification, whereas the UAE acknowledges Saudi leadership and interest to a lesser degree than Bahrain and Kuwait, Qatar challenges it in the most opportunist way within the GCC. There are numerous factors affecting this configuration. The changing balance of power, the regional transformation, and power accumulation have functioned as a leverage vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia in favor of Qatar and the UAE. However, geopolitical considerations, domestic political issues, level of interdependence, and state identity favoring different role conceptions have paved the way for varied levels and types of behavior about Saudi Arabia. For example, in geopolitical respect, while Qatar's need for more accommodative relations with Iran

due to its shared gas field disturbs Saudi Arabia and its antagonistic position, the UAE's threat perception and the occupied islands disputes underpin its accommodative position. The UAE's level of economic interdependence with Saudi Arabia is more intense than Qatar. This also affects their choices. On the other hand, the UAE has more common mutual concerns with the Saudis in domestic politics as the MB and Shia minorities (Szalai, 2017, pp. 4-14).

These dynamics and variations are directly connected with Qatar and the UAE's policies during the Arab Spring. As indicated above, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have troubled relations that caused different forms of confrontation. The major root of this lies behind Saudi Arabia's support for a coup attempt in 1996 to reverse back Hamad's seizure of the power and a similar event was duplicated in 2005 as well. Al-Jazeera is another source of strained relations, which eventually brought about Saudi Arabia's withdrawal of its ambassador from Qatar in 2002 (Fromherz, 2017, pp. 100-107). Saudi Arabia's manipulation and instrumentalization of its tribal ties over the al-Murra tribe in Qatar to undermine Hamad's authority by encouraging social cleavages just as fifth-column are another reason for tense ties (Al-Kuwari, 2019, pp. 47-48). The unresolved border problems between them also caused many diplomatic crises and armed deadly incidents in the 1990s (Okruhlik & Conge, 1999, pp. 235-236).

Given these dynamics, Qatar saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity to distinguish itself from the Saudi sphere of influence. This quest for more autonomy is one of the essential motivations of Qatar's reaction to the Arab Spring. Through building a new network of alliances with the new regimes, which are the MB or its-affected groups, Qatar hoped to gain more leverage to balance Saudi's power. In ideological respect, by deepening and extending its ties with the MB, Qatar also attempted to balance Wahhabi Saudi clerics' power in domestic politics (Quilliam, 2019, pp. 110-116). Hence, with this policy approach, Qatar challenged Saudi Arabia with its liberal and Islamist orientations, which increased the new tensions between them in many cases in the post-2011 era (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020, pp. 10-11).

Although the UAE has similar border problems (Mazrouei, 2017) and desires to refrain from Saudi domination. The UAE's relations with Saudi Arabia are more stable than Qatar. Shared threat perceptions regarding the political Islam/MB and Iran and

regional visions constitute the core logic behind their security partnership. The before stressed shared threat perceptions and security concerns revealed by the Arab Spring-led change have triggered Saudi-UAE bilateral alliance and de facto cooperation to overcome these threats (Gervais, 2017, p. 33). This alliance has also cemented over personal-level high cooperation with the rise of Muhammed bin Salman (MbS) to crown prince position in the kingdom because of the fact that MbZ has a great influence on MbS (Quilliam, 2019, pp. 118-119). In short, the compatibility of their political goals -overcoming shared threats, imposing their preferred regional vision, exploiting power vacuum- consists of the foundation stone of their cooperation. So, operating around these common goals, the UAE has benefited from Saudi Arabia's regional power and influence so that it can pursue its agenda behind the scenes without taking glaring risks as in the case of Yemen intervention.

#### **4.3.4. Summarizing with a Mechanism**

In this context, the following sentences summarize the mechanism of divergence for Qatar and the UAE. As a part of unit-level variables, “elite consensus, government or regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elite cohesion” function as a restrictive and enabler of the states' reactions to the systemic stimuli by determining the ability of political actors, as Schweller (2004, p. 169) argues. Consensus and cohesion in the levels of social and elite; immense economic resources; and lack of considerable vulnerabilities inside constitute the domestic factors that underpin the coherence of Qatari state. So, when this kind of environment merges with the political system that gives full autonomy to the ruling elites, elites' preferences and perceptions can be operationalized without a remarkable constrain. The existing strategic culture and security strategies of the Qatari state also made easier the revisionist policy adaptation. Through the lens of these characteristics, Qatari elites saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity for the sake of its self-interested pursuit of power. It's relations with Saudi Arabia, the US's initial position, and its prior policy orientations created powerful incentives for revolutionary policy adaptation. This was a very risky politics for a small state; nevertheless, Qatar's domestic environment made possible the risk-taking politics and resource extraction for it under the supervision of Hamad and his inner circle. Because, for them, the value of revisionism outweighed the value of the status quo. To put it briefly, empowered by domestic politics, the Qatari elites perceived the

regional change as an opportunity that culminated in with the revolutionary support for the Arab Spring across the region.

In the UAE, the federal structure complicates the picture. Differences in elite and social levels means another layer must be checked in foreign policy formation. These factors foster a relatively fragmented and vulnerable structure. This means less state coherence than Qatar. The prior security strategies and strategic culture of the UAE have been formulized around these concerns and vulnerabilities. For the ruling elites, there are more critical issues that needed to be balanced and managed for maintaining stability and regime security. Among them, the MB and Iran matters are the foremost ones. Therefore, these factors, to some extent, restrain the ruling elites' scope of action. Given these reasons, the UAE saw the Arab Spring as a threat through the lens of domestic regime security. While the US's initial position was instigating the heightened threat perception, shared concerns with Saudi Arabia encouraged the UAE counter-revolutionary position. Then, the re-adjustments in the US policy has pushed its counter-revolutionary politics more assertively. This assertiveness was spearheaded by Abu Dhabi thanks to its dominant position within the state. Therefore, resource extraction and political will for this kind of regional politics have been provided by Abu Dhabi's small ruling elites who are ready to canalize the state's wealthiness. So, due to the domestic features and threat perceptions, for the UAE's elites, the value of the status quo outweighed the value of revisionism. However, the UAE's counter-revolutionary position is not pure defensive status-quo politics. Its commitment is on the old normative consensus of the regional order. So, within the framework of authoritarian, secular, and militaristic regime type, the UAE has also conducted an opportunistic and expansionist politics in order to enhance its regional penetration and influence by taking advantage of the structural change, just as Qatar. In short, unit-level features have prompted the Abu Dhabi ruling elites' interpretation of the Arab Spring through the lens of perceived threats, which produced the counter-revolutionary reaction. This is not a just defensive politics intending to overcome threats, but offensive and expansionist within the counter-revolutionary framework.

#### **4.3.5. Libya: as a Showcase of the Two Small States' Pro-Activism**

As I mentioned in the previous chapters, Libya is the key example that contains almost all elements of complex conflict dynamics of the post-Arab Spring period. In this vein, it has witnessed both revolutionary enthusiasm and hope for a democratic country and counter-revolutionary coup and oppression for an authoritarian and militaristic one. It is safe to argue that Libya is the showcase of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary regional struggle in which Qatar and the UAE have played their high-level assertive and interventionist roles. Therefore, Libya is the best case to demonstrate the abovementioned arguments of these two states' foreign policies in the Arab Spring.

At the initial stage, Qatar and the UAE joined the NATO-led military operation to overthrow the Gaddafi regime by sending their military forces and legitimizing the military involvement for the Arab public opinion. This first reaction is the manifestations of their opportunity perception in order to lead the change in Libya for their interest under the Western patronage. The following process has witnessed the divergence according to Qatar and the UAE's policy preferences that were shaped by threat and opportunity perceptions about the Arab Spring.

In Libya, Qatar's all economic, military, and political supports for the MB-connected groups and individuals in the transition process indicate how Doha attempted to insert itself into the new state-building phase of Libya as one of the prime sponsors of Islamist-led democracy in order to exploit the change and enhance its regional influence in an opportunist and pragmatic way.

On the other hand, the UAE's similar economic, political, and military supports for the secular and former factions, as firstly Mahmoud Cibril and then Haftar, against what Qatar supported in the Libyan transition process, particularly after 2014. This demonstrates not only how the UAE's threat perceptions relating the political Islam and Qatar's influence affected its policies in Libya, but also its opportunity perception to further power projection by using Libya as a strategic foothold within the counter-revolutionary regional design.

To sum up, Libya policies of Qatar and the UAE are the manifestation of how the Arab-Spring-led change enabled and underpinned their pro-active and interventionist actions; and how unit-level differences produced their revolutionary and counter-revolutionary separation in Libya.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I attempted to answer the puzzling question of this thesis: Why did the two so similar small states of Qatar and the UAE take conflicting positions as a reaction to the Arab Spring? Around the produced and tested arguments through the process-tracing method in the second and third chapters, I firstly put foreign policy responses of Qatar and the UAE as a dependent variable to trace the roots of the differences. To this end, I initially put these two states' rising in the international theater as a result of the convergence of multiple structural and domestic factors so as to underpin their shared assertiveness and interventionism for further power projection. Then, under the neoclassical realist theory perspective, I determined the systemic forces unleashed by the Arab Spring-led change that pushed these states to take actions for taking advantage of opportunities and proactively balancing threats. Around these systemic incentives by prioritizing a top-down approach, I analyzed unit-level features as an intervening variable that shaped their power and threat assessments regarding the Arab Spring. Fostered by domestic structure and elite images, differences in their reactions are rooted in their threat and power perceptions to regime security. While domestic vulnerabilities of the UAE form a baseline of its reaction that prioritized balance of threat logic, quite consolidated domestic structure of Qatar forms it a baseline of opportunistic power perception in the Arab Spring process.

In conclusion, I argue that the Arab Spring-led change created powerful incentives for these states' opportunistic power pursuit across the region. This is the common point in their reactions. However, because of domestic considerations and vulnerabilities, the way of the UAE and Qatar was separated under revolutionary and counter-revolutionary politics. They opportunistically pursued their interests within these diverging alliances by taking advantage of the changing balance of power and regional power vacuum.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1. Results and Contributions

As an international relations student, I was very interested in the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East in the post-2011 period. The reasons and drivers of all this turbulence occupied a central position in my readings. When I first read Maridina Nahas' (1985) seminal study, which examines the crises of the Middle East regional state-system through revolutionary challenges and counter-revolutionary challenges, I realized that history is repeating itself again. As a continuation of this similar pattern, the Arab Spring is a revolutionary moment that undermined the status quo by challenging the existing state-system and its governing principles or, in words of Tüzgen (2019) "normative consensus". As a matter of course, this revolutionary moment produced its own counter-revolutionary moment led by status quo power as well. In this sense, reading the regional politics in the post-2011 period as a struggle between revolutionary/revisionist and counter-revolutionary/status quo powers gave me a deeper insight to understand what's going on in the Middle East.

In this context, there was another interesting phenomenon that drew my attention. The unusual and striking roles of two small Gulf states, Qatar's revolutionary and the UAE's counter-revolutionary politics, in this regional struggle. So, the idea of studying these two states' Arab Spring politics as microcosms of the broader revolutionary and counter-revolutionary patterns in the Middle East is the background of my research study. Then, I discovered the puzzling nature of foreign policies of Qatar and the UAE as well. On the one hand, their degree of involvement in the regional politics in a very interventionist way challenges the traditional expected patterns of small states' behavior. On the other hand, their opposing positionings required an explanation of

why two similar states react differently to the same structural change. These are the essential issues that drove my research.

With this agenda, in this research, I intend to indicate why and how Qatar and the UAE took very assertive revolutionary and counter-revolutionary positions in response to the Arab Spring. For this purpose, initially, in the second and third chapters, I separately examined Qatar and the UAE by focusing on their foreign policies before and after the Arab Spring. I explained the change, which was triggered by the Arab Spring-led change, and drivers of this change. Then, the alleged arguments regarding these policy motivations and acts were evidenced by tracing their manifestations at the operational and discourse-level in many countries. Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, I indicated the roots of their divergent positionings in response to the Arab Spring by using a neoclassical realist framework.

In the UAE case, I demonstrated that the Arab Spring is a major breaking-point for the Emirati foreign policy. In the post-2011 period, the UAE has self-confidently conducted highly interventionist and assertive foreign policy overseeing its interests across the region. Therefore, it is claimed that a noteworthy change has marked in the UAE foreign policy stemming from the Arab Spring-led change since 2011. This change has been driven by the UAE's calculations swinging between countering security threats and exploiting the regional power vacuum for the sake of its opportunist interests as regards the structural change caused by the Arab Spring. That is to say, the UAE took a counter-revolutionary and interventionist position against the Arab Spring because it saw the events and their impacts as a threat that has to be balanced and, at the same time, as an opportunity to strengthen its region-wide political power and project its vision about the regional order.

In this regard, interrelated with its domestic vulnerabilities and regional vision, the UAE's assertiveness motivated by its threat perceptions regarding the rise of political Islam, Iran, and Qatar, on the one hand, and opportunity perception to expand its regional penetration through economic, military, and political power projections on the other hand. The counter-revolutionary regional design constitutes the overall framework in which the UAE has conducted its policies to fulfill these ends. All of these drivers have shaped the UAE's acts at the operational level. So, I indicated

manifestations of these policies on the ground by examining the UAE's actions in Libya, Tunisia, Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, and Syria to underpin my arguments.

In the Qatar case, I demonstrate that the Arab Spring is a major breaking-point as well. It has triggered an essential shift in Qatari foreign policy toward more assertive and interventionist orientations across the region. Qatar took the side of the revolutionary wave in favor of the regional change. Its policies driven by pragmatic and opportunist impulses in order to capitalize on the change for its interest and power-driven objectives. By doing so, Doha aimed at locating itself into the new regional power configuration as a pioneer and powerful state through new networks of alliances. Through tracing Qatar's action in many countries, I showed that this Qatari opportunism manifested itself in Qatar's selective stance varying from country to country, pragmatic alliance with the MB and other proxies, utilization of economic resources and Al Jazeera as a political tool, and re-adjustment according to shifting regional zeitgeist.

In the comparison chapter, I attempted to solve my main research problems: the roots of differences in terms of conflicting positioning and resemblances in terms of the degree of pro-activism. Firstly, I claim that as a result of the convergence of multiple structural and domestic factors these two states have gained considerable power and position in the international theater. This power accumulation has underpinned their shared assertiveness and pro-active interventionism for further power projection in the midst permissive structural environment. Then, by resorting to neo-classical realist framework, I explained the reasons behind their different revolutionary and counter-revolutionary policies and I claim that fostered by domestic structure and elite images, differences in their reactions are rooted in their threat and power perceptions to regime security. While domestic vulnerabilities of the UAE form a baseline of its reaction that prioritized balance of threat logic, quite consolidated domestic structure of Qatar forms it a baseline of opportunistic power perception in the Arab Spring process.

In this context, I argue that threat and opportunity perceptions of Qatar and the UAE regarding the Arab Spring-led regional change are the main explanatory and distinguishing factors that shaped their foreign policy reactions to the Arab Spring. In Qatari case, opportunity perception outweighs threat perception and leads its

opportunistic, pragmatic, and power-driven foreign policy in the Arab Spring. In the Emirates, threat perception is prioritized in its reaction, but significant degree of opportunism is also present within a counter-revolutionary agenda.

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that due to their role in the assessment of systemic stimuli as a part of power or threat perception and the mobilization of resources for a proper response according to this perception, domestic variables are important components of the states' foreign policy reactions to the external systemic environment. Particularly, in countries where power and decision-making processes are concentrated on small circles, as in Qatar and the UAE, decision-makers' perceptions and involvements are more influential as a part of this unit-level features. In this regard, I claim that the Arab Spring-led change created powerful incentives for these states' opportunistic power pursuit across the region. This is the common point in their reactions. However, because of domestic considerations and vulnerabilities, the way of the UAE and Qatar was separated under revolutionary and counter-revolutionary politics. They opportunistically pursued their interests within these diverging alliances by taking advantage of the changing balance of power and regional power vacuum.

First of all, this thesis contributes to the comparative literature on the foreign policies of Qatar and the UAE in the Arab Spring. Although there are important works on this issue written by David Roberts (2017a) and Emma Soubrier (2016). Existing studies are not enough to provide a holistic picture in the explanation of these two small gulf states' reactions to the Arab Spring. Therefore, in order to fill this gap, this research's contributions serve firstly to deepen and improve David Robert's (2017a) political Islam and internal-based explanations, then to elaborate Soubrier's (2016) comparative work in the context of the Arab Spring by adding external environment as a primary structural force into the equations and taking into account such unit-level variables as domestic structure, elite features, strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and relational dynamics with Saudi Arabia and the US. Furthermore, thanks to the case-centric process-tracing method, this research also contributes to this comparative literature by analyzing manifestations of these states' political agendas in many countries and foreign policy tools.

Secondly, through the cases of Qatar and the UAE, this study contributes to the developing literature on small states by showing why and how, and under what conditions, small states can conduct proactive foreign policies by challenging traditional molds.

Thirdly, by operationalizing neoclassical realist theory, this research modestly contributes to this theoretical debate in a case-oriented way by demonstrating its suitability for the examination of the Middle East, in particular the Gulf, states' foreign policies.

Lastly, this study separately contributes to the foreign policy analysis of Qatar and the UAE by investigating the overall continuities and ruptures in their orientations; basic foreign policy strategies, drives, and tools; and operationalization of their foreign policies.

## **5.2. Limitations and Recommendations for Policy Implementations Future Research**

Because of the fact that regimes in Qatar and the UAE are very elite-centered and autonomous and foreign policies are determined behind closed doors by a small circle of ruling elites, there are limits to the access to trustworthy formal information about these countries' foreign policy goals and implications that are generally released by Ministry of Foreign Affairs in other countries.

In this vein, there are not enough biographical studies on rulers, particularly crucial figures that have determined the current political agendas and pathways of these countries such as Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani for Qatar and Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan for the UAE. Therefore, informations about these figures and to what extent and how they managed their countries' foreign policies are limited.

In this regard, firstly, further research on biographical studies of the rulers in Qatar and the UAE are needed to determine the extent of elite-level involvements in foreign policy articulations. There is also a need for future research on unit-level features and trends of these countries addressing their impacts on the assessments of the external environment.

Research should be deepened on the Gulf states' activism both at the regional and international levels in order to analyze the roots and resources of this heightened policy pro-activism. Because identification of causal relations and dynamics of this 'Gulf moment' can provide a solid analytical ground to anticipate possible policy implementations in the region.

Based on these results, practitioners should consider these two Gulf states' policy extensions and agendas to make solid decisions for regional stability and their countries' interests. Because, in the post-2011, Qatar and the UAE are the considerable contributors of the regional disorder in the Middle East. Especially after 2013, the UAE has played a central and greedy role and embedded itself in the political and military stalemates of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen. Therefore, as I indicated, accurate evaluation of the UAE's political goals and operational capacity is crucial for the possible peace-making and peace-building process to end civil wars in Libya and Yemen.

Also, as I show, seeking for political autonomy vis-à-vis its neighbors is an essential component of Qatari foreign policy. Therefore, even it has downgraded its level of assertiveness in foreign policy under changing circumstances, Qatar would protect its political autonomy at any cost. Qatar's attitude in the 2017 Gulf diplomatic crisis despite the political and economic blockages is a good example of this. In this sense, for future diplomatic solutions, practitioners should take into account Qatar's red-line.

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