ESSAY

The impact of COVID-19 on the Persian Gulf: the realist perspective [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

This article aims to show the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on international relations and state policy in the Persian Gulf through the prism of realism theory. COVID-19 became a game changer for the domestic politics of the Persian Gulf countries and for the balance of power in that subregion. The application of realism reveals the statecraft of the Arab Persian Gulf during the pandemic to be a struggle for power and its consolidation. Therefore the hypothesis of the article holds that the authoritarian Arab Gulf states used the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis to consolidate and strengthen regime power and conduct humanitarian/mask/COVID-19 diplomacy toward the regimes most affected by the pandemic, shifting the geopolitical landscape. The first part of the article presents the general assumption of the analysis and the theoretical framework. The second and the third respectively discuss domestic and foreign policies of the Arab Persian Gulf states in the face of the pandemic, highlighting strengthening authoritarian tendencies and authoritarian bilateral cooperation. The fourth part relate to the Gulf Cooperation Council and its reaction on COVID-19. The last part draws on the theoretical framework adopted in the article offer conclusions that answer research questions.

Keywords

realism, COVID-19, Persian Gulf, Middle East, pandemic, coronavirus, China, U.S.
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Introduction
While the COVID-19 pandemic was a global challenge that required a global response, it would be difficult to deliver such a reaction. Collective action should be natural to tackle a “common enemy” effectively, but most states focused on self-interest and a predominantly competitive approach to challenge the threat. States relied on no one but themselves to ensure their survival and security. No global power, the United States of America or China, took the lead in the global fight against the pandemic, and neither did international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the United Nations (UN), which at best played the role of supporting actors. US President Donald Trump even undermined the WHO’s reaction to COVID-19 by suspending its funding. Other organizations, such as the European Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), were constrained by outbreaks of nationalism and unilateral reactions. The first question which should be answered is: why did the Persian Gulf states decide to pursue a non-cooperative internal policy, and what results has it produced? While another crucial question to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the Persian Gulf states is: how has the consolidation and strengthening of authoritarian regimes influenced the foreign policy of the Persian Gulf states?

Obviously, realism does not provide solutions to the pandemic problem. Realism has no monopoly on how to explain international affairs, but in this particular case, there is quite a broad consensus that it has much to offer. Most of all, realism allows us to understand how countries respond to the crisis and why they respond in such a way. In this article, I will try to show why realism is an effective tool for analyzing the Middle East, its reaction to the pandemic, and what it tells us about states’ behaviors in the face of a global crisis.

To achieve the above purpose, I put forward a hypothesis according to which the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis was used by the authoritarian Arab Gulf states to consolidate and strengthen regime power and conduct humanitarian/mask/COVID-19 diplomacy toward the regimes most affected by the pandemic, shifting the geopolitical landscape.

I examined the foreign and domestic policies of selected Arab Persian Gulf states to verify this hypothesis. I will especially refer to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) case study as an essentially effective modus operandi to cope with the pandemic and take advantage of it. I also consider the securitization of the pandemic to show how a public health challenge was transformed into an internal state security issue and led to the application of repressive policy and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in Arab Persian Gulf states. I will also refer to the basic assumptions of realism (neoclassical realism) and internal and external variables that influence domestic and foreign policies.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I explain the basic foundation of realism and its effectiveness in researching the Middle East and COVID-19. In the following two sections, I discuss the measures taken by Arab states of the Persian Gulf in response to COVID-19 in domestic and foreign policy. The fourth section regards the Gulf Cooperation Council’s policy toward the pandemic crisis. In my conclusion, I try to answer the questions above and summarize realism’s contribution to analyzing the Persian Gulf’s response to the global pandemic crisis.

The Middle East and the COVID-19 pandemic in the light of realism theory
Realism is one of the dominant theories of international relations that seek to explain the conditions and motives of a state’s behaviors and foreign policy. According to the realists, international relations are dominated by states (state-centrism), each of whom acts and strives for its own national interest, understood in terms of strength. The goal of the state is the pursuit, possession and application of power, which gives predominance to one nation over others. Besides power, the primary concern of all states is security (power politics) based on militaries which secure its survival but simultaneously lead to a security dilemma. According to the realists, power or the threat of using power remains the most effective tool in foreign policy.

Realism is not a monolith but rather a diverse body of thought. Since there are different variations of realism, the interpretations also differ. Classical realism, represented by Hans Morgenthau, among others, sees the sources of conflict in the egoistic nature of humanity, which also applies to the behavior of states. Neorealists, represented by Kenneth Waltz, among others, focus on anarchy in the international system, i.e. the lack of a supreme authority that would have a monopoly on resolving disputes, enforcing the law, regulating the system of international politics and managing international relations, including the managing of crises such as pandemics. As the dominant international actors, when under threat, states rely on themselves to adopt a self-help strategy to survive and thus ensure their safety, which in turn depends on their power. Therefore, the acquisition of more power remains a crucial element in the raison d’État of the state.

One of the last developments in the realism theory include neoclassical realism which appeared in the 1990s. This approach primarily emphasizes the role of internal factors (such as internal structure of the states, relations of state-society level, political processes within the state, economic development of the state, role of leaders, political system) in the foreign policy

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1 A security dilemma is when many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others. As a result, it leads to competition between states and strains political relations.
of state. Internal possibilities and limitations should be treated as intervening variables that influence the dependent variable, i.e. the foreign policy of the state and the independent variable – the distribution of power in the international system and the international structure.5

In the conflictual conditions of the Middle East, realism is considered the most effective and applicable conceptual perspective through which to view the region.6 Stephen Walt, a representative of defensive realism, demonstrated that the states in the Arab world very often block any one country from gaining dominance, despite persistent calls for Arab unity and concerted efforts by one government to exert leadership in inter-Arab affairs. Walt argued that concrete measures of power have less impact than more fluid notions of threat in determining how the states of the region interact.7 Security dilemmas tend to spark arms races and aggravate mistrust and antagonism among states. Some of them engage in balancing behavior when they confront actual or potential aggressors to preserve the stability of the system. In contrast, others choose to align with the aggressor in the hope that they will be rewarded for their support (bandwagoning). External and internal threats perceived by a group of states might integrate them and lead to the emergence of regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council.8 Competition for power and maximization of power perceived as a way to state survival and a guarantee of state security lies in the heart of the Arab states’ domestic and foreign policies.

The global pandemic crisis that originated in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 sparked a wave of comments and research studies on international relations. The theory that found particular recognition and proved effective in explaining the effects of the global pandemic crisis was realism. Primarily because it emphasized the dominance of the state in international relations and individual national interests over collective ones in the absence of a common global response to COVID-19. It does not mean that cooperation did not occur during the pandemic crisis, but that it only appeared when it didn’t clash with national interest.9 Realism reminds us that, because of the trust deficit systemically inherent in an international system characterized by anarchy, states hesitate to forgo their first instinct for self-help, even amidst a shared global challenge.10

The global pandemic crisis highlighted state actors’ central role and position in the fight against COVID-19. In the initial days of the global pandemic, it was not international organizations that citizens turned to for protection first; it was their governments. Without a global authority governing international relations, the nation-state remained the leading actor responsible for health security and the protection of society. It was the states that carried out activities in the field of health policy, made the decisions about closing borders, limiting movement and traveling, and using the resources of security and public health at their disposal. By introducing restrictions, the states did so despite the opposition of companies and enterprises that feared collapse and bankruptcy, thus emphasizing their authority in ensuring order and influencing social relations. Self-help and self-preservation, with their positive and negative effects (i.e. unilaterialism over multilateralism), are still the guiding principles for states.

It was the states who decided how to cope with this global pandemic crisis or, more precisely, how to use COVID-19 to increase their international position and consolidate their state authority. Some states, such as the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait, decided to use COVID-19 to conduct mask diplomacy or COVID-19 diplomacy based on medical supplies and humanitarian aid to states most affected by the pandemic (i.e. Iran). Others decided to introduce a state of emergency which gave state authorities additional prerogatives and strengthened executive power. The global pandemic crisis was also used to blame other countries for causing it. The power competition could be observed in quickly spreading rhetoric blaming China for creating the virus (by the US) or blaming the US for the crisis to harm its enemies (by Iran). In reality, China wanted to deflect the criticism it faced after the virus epicenter was identified in Wuhan, while Iran was trying to convince the international community to lift sanctions limiting its ability to respond to the crisis. States also competed to supply medical markets with masks, gloves, and disinfectants and to invent and sell vaccines.

It is hard to disagree with realism about the fact that in the global pandemic crisis, states were the actors most responsible for the survival and security of the state and its societies. However, realism did not help explain why the most powerful states such as China, India or the US, despite power resources such as a large population, territory, economic strength and military power, were among the most affected by COVID-19. In contrast, small Persian Gulf states such as Qatar and the UAE appeared to be more successful in addressing non-traditional security concerns. In the neo-realist tradition, small states are regarded as weak, but their size turned out to be an advantage in response to the coronavirus. In this particular case, a small population and small territorial size turned out to be easier to control the spread of the coronavirus.11

Domestic policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf
The first reports on COVID-19 in the Middle East were issued by the WHO in February 2020. The virus was probably...
transmitted by passengers flying from China to Iran. Contrary to other states that suspended flights to and from China, Iran left its borders open for aircraft from China operated, among others, by Mahan Air, affiliated with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This reaction was in line with the realism assumption that emphasizes the state’s dominant role in international relations and authority decisions on implementing (or not) crisis management procedures to protect the country and ensure the state’s survival. Countries, not international organizations, have been on the front lines in the fight against the coronavirus. The reaction time to the increase in infections in societies by states was much shorter than by international organizations, especially in authoritarian states (more on this issue in the following part of the article). There was no doubt that states had a wide range of measures at their disposal to counter the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Most Arab states declared a state of national emergency, closed state borders to foreigners and imposed strict containment measures, including mandatory self-isolation, restricted movement for citizens and curfews. Quarantine and curfew measures and masking were enforced by severe penalties for non-compliance, ranging from heavy fines to prison sentences (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE). It is worth mentioning that many states did not wait to have confirmed cases to start imposing movement restrictions and social distancing. Saudi Arabia suspended pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina and limited access to religious sites in early February.

In response to the COVID-19 threat, Arab Gulf states used the army and the police to enforce movement restrictions. Artificial intelligence (drones/robots/video, software/surveillance cameras) was responsible for tracking citizens and recognizing their faces, voices and license plates; a curfew and electronic monitoring of infected people who contracted the virus were introduced, and even ordinary citizens had to fill out an online form to leave their place of residence (Dubai). Civil liberties and privacy were restricted, and gathering and travel abroad were banned on the pretext of limiting the transmission of the virus. Spreading false information about the virus, violating COVID regulations or promoting information which contradicted the authorities’ official statements, could result in arrest (Saudi Arabia) or fines up to 20 000 Dirhams (UAE).

Such an application of extraordinary security measures (e.g. introducing a state of emergency, putting the army on the streets) to protect an entity (e.g. a state, society, ideology, culture) which, according to the actor taking these measures (the so-called securitizing actor), is existentially endangered is called securitization. The leaders of the Persian Gulf states (and not only them) recognized that COVID-19 poses a threat not only to public health but also to state security. The pandemic, therefore, became a pretext for an intensified repressive policy and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies. Such a political practice should come as no surprise as very often, crises and threats are taken advantage of by religious or governmental circles. A good example of this is an attempt to marginalize groups by blaming them for transmitting the virus, Shiites or Sunnis, (e.g. the Arab states in the Persian Gulf quickly closed their borders to Iranians) or manipulating disease statistics. Due to the epidemiological threat, public demonstrations were also banned, which became a convenient argument for the authorities to limit the activities of the political opposition. In such situations, it seems that for the authoritarian Arab regimes, the indicator of success was, to a lesser extent, the effective fight against COVID-19 but rather effectively taking advantage of the pandemic and amassing political capital from it.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an intense discussion began in power circles on strengthening the prerogatives of the authorities to fight the pandemic more effectively. For example, in Kuwait, which provides relative freedom, political participation and an elected parliament, the pandemic strengthened public confidence in the government regarding crisis management. With the pandemic outbreak, the parliament’s role in Kuwait was marginalized, the government received broader powers (including the obligation to consult any parliamentary decisions with the government), and most parliamentary sessions were suspended. As a result, the importance of the legislature has decreased, and the decisions taken restricting freedom and civil liberties were rationalized by the crisis situation.

In the light of the above-described measures taken by Arab states in the face of the pandemic challenge, the central role of the state’s security and permanent insecure environment comes to the forefront. States must provide security for themselves because no other actor will do it for them. The mechanism states used to make themselves more secure was maximizing power, mobilizing the police and army, limiting civil liberties and using technological innovations. However, it is not the politics of power or the will to dominate, usually indicated by realists, that cause the security problem, but the coronavirus pandemic. But it was definitely state actors who took responsibility for resolving the problem of insecurity using all available instruments, both hard and soft

power. Hard power instruments were briefly described (emergency state, military and police force, introducing a curfew, tightening of the penal code, banning demonstrations), while one of the crucial soft power instruments was the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination of Persian Gulf citizens.

By the end of 2021, full vaccination rates were as follows: the UAE 89%, Qatar 88%, Saudi Arabia 66%, Kuwait 74%, Bahrain 67% and Oman 56%.19 The difference between the first UAE and last Oman was 33% and shows that authorities in Abu Dhabi far outdid other states. Implementing a vaccination program resulted in lower hospitalization and mortality rates compared to other regions, partly due to the very young regional population (60% of the Middle East population is under the age of 25). In the Gulf, the most vulnerable population were expatriate workers, living in more crowded and less sanitary conditions with unequal access to health services. As a result, the mortality rates among migrant workers were higher than among the local populations.20 Material capabilities such as monetary reserves (that translate into medical infrastructure, access to the vaccines) are according to the offensive realist John Mearsheimer, are one of the building blocks of power and were crucial to cope with the pandemic21. Material potential of the UAE (support humanitarian initiatives, donating medical aid and equipment in 128 countries) became a vital part of the mask/COVID-19 diplomacy improving state branding and strengthen its position on the international arena22.

Selected actions and responses from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf are presented in the table below. Strict containment measures helped Arab states curb the rise in infections during the first and second waves of COVID-19 (March 2020-January 2021). On the one hand, severe fines for breaking bans, limited parliamentary prerogatives, closing cities and entire areas, tracking applications had political and social consequences for social security, freedom of movement and economic stability. The purpose of these measures, in addition to limiting the spread of the virus, was to maintain political stability and consolidate authoritarian power. On the other hand, a developed health care system and services, previous experiences with a similar pandemic in the past, and material capabilities helped the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to prepare well and successfully contain the epidemic.

Foreign policy and the balance of power in the Persian Gulf COVID-19 policy has become a part of states’ foreign policy to pursue their goals such as increasing security, improving their image (state branding) and increasing power. One such example is the UAE, which successfully used the pandemic as an instrument of soft power in its foreign policy (as did China) to strengthen its image as a partner and ally in times of crisis. First, the government in Abu Dhabi used its position as a logistics hub in the region and established cooperation with vaccine manufacturers to become a regional transport and distribution center. Thanks to the agreement with Sinopharm China National Biotec Group and Abu Dabi Group 42 (artificial intelligence company), the UAE produced 200 million vaccine doses annually. Secondly, due to the disruption of food supply chains by COVID-19, the UAE launched the “100 million meals” program, supplying food to nearly 30 countries in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe. The UAE also founded a platform for donors from over 51 countries as well as various local, regional and international organizations.23

The UAE became a donor of medical aid (masks, gloves, protective clothing and more) to Iran, the coronavirus epicenter in the region with the highest infection and death rates. It is worth mentioning that some Arab Gulf states perceived Iran as an enemy. Such a turn of the UAE toward the Persian state can be viewed through the prism of neoclassical realism (Gideon Rose, Thomas Christiansen, Randall Schweller, William Wohlforth, Fareed Zakaria), which holds that the foreign policy of states is a consequence of external challenges, especially changes in the relative power of states. Such a move by the UAE (as well as Qatar and Kuwait) allowed them to play a greater international role than their power would imply. Neoclassical realists stress that sometimes states put security first, and other times they take risks to transform the international scene in line with their interests24. Iran has an unresolved territorial dispute with the UAE over the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa islands which it seized in 1971. Since COVID-19 has reduced the Iranian threat, the authorities in Abu Dhabi have decided to lend support to their geopolitical rival, putting aside past disputes. Similar aid was delivered by Kuwait and Qatar and Western European countries, Russia, China and Japan. These actions helped to lower the temperature of mutual tensions between the countries of the sub-region in which the crisis (2019–2021) was caused by military tensions between Iran and the US and their allies in the region.

The authorities in Abu Dhabi sent a medical aid shipment to Wuhan, China’s “center” of the pandemic, Afghanistan, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Pakistan, Serbia and the Seychelles. The aid that the Arab Emirates gave China especially has shown

19 All data comes from https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?
### Table 1. Overview of selected health system responses and containment measures in the Arab Gulf countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Curfews/lockdowns/ movement restrictions</th>
<th>Social distancing measures and barrier gestures</th>
<th>Health screening/tracking/quarantine</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Night-time curfew (March-May); Partial lockdown (March-May); Full lockdown (May)</td>
<td>Prohibition of gatherings of more than 5 people in public spaces; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation;</td>
<td>Screening of all incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine for incoming passengers;</td>
<td>Suspended flights; application Tawakkalna gathering vulnerable data (location, health status, access to medical services); Sport competitions were held behind closed doors; closure of schools, universities, gym,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>Night-time curfew (ended August 15); Full lockdown (May); Night-time curfew;</td>
<td>Masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation;</td>
<td>Random testing of population; mandatory quarantine for incoming passengers;</td>
<td>suspended flights; public holiday declared in March 2020; mosques and schools were closed; border closures were put in place; borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia were closed; the parliament’s role in Kuwait was marginalized, the government received broader powers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>Night-time curfew (ended August 15);</td>
<td>Prohibition of gatherings of more than 5 people in public spaces; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation;</td>
<td>Screening of all incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine for incoming passengers;</td>
<td>Suspended flights; sale of shisha prohibited; schools and universities were closed; nationals were not allowed to depart to other countries; the number of coronavirus cases in the sultanate had increased to 2,816; three of two passengers’ hotels across the Muscat area were closed; 12 days of quarantine were required for the Muscat governate for playing cricket;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>Gatherings limited to 15 people indoors / 30 people outdoors;</td>
<td>Masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation;</td>
<td>Health tracking app mandatory; Thermal screening in all public venues;</td>
<td>Suspended flights; public places were closed; mask were mandatory; 10 people were arrested for violation a home quarantine;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Full lockdown or night-time curfew depending on area (ended end of June);</td>
<td>Masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation;</td>
<td>Mandatory Covid-19 test for incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine (2 days) for incoming passengers;</td>
<td>Mandatory Covid-19 test for incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine (2 days) for incoming passengers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>Night-time curfew (March-July); Night-time curfew (April-June); Travel restrictions in and out of Abu Dhabi;</td>
<td>Social gatherings limited to 10 people;</td>
<td>health tracking app mandatory;</td>
<td>Health tracking app mandatory;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that the support that both countries have given each other in the fight against the pandemic may open a new chapter in mutual relations. The UAE supported China not only materially but also morally when Burj Khalifa, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and other iconic landmarks were illuminated in the colors of the Chinese flag as a sign of solidarity with the Chinese people. This form of foreign policy, known as humanitarian diplomacy, has gained widespread recognition, including from the WHO and United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

The scope and ambition of a UAE foreign policy derives from its growing place in the international system and its huge material power capabilities. These two, for neoclassical realism, constitute a driving force of foreign policy. However, they do not reduce foreign policy solely to these variables. Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter. Moreover, political leaders in authoritarian states have complete freedom to extract national resources exactly in the way UAE has done. According to neoclassical realists these internal factors impact of state behavior. And last but not least, neoclassical realists argue that the impact of systemic pressures may shape directions of foreign policy especially as a particular time. They believe understanding links between power and policy requires close examination of the contexts within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented. In times where a virus threatens security of states all around the world, each of them implements crisis management procedures and “emergency” foreign policies, but their efficiency is determined by variables mentioned above.

Besides improving relations between the UAE and Iran, a kind of de-securitization could be observed in Saudi Arabia – Iran relations. From April to October 2021, four rounds of talks were held between these two countries, concerning, inter alia, the reopening of the Iranian consulate in Jeddah. The openness of both countries to dialogue aimed to reduce the level of mutual animosity was groundbreaking news in the context of the last 40 years of deep hostility. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, emphasized the importance of good relations with Iran as a neighbor, expressed his hopes to overcome mutual difficulties and build positive relations that would be beneficial for the entire region. Alongside demographic changes, the sanctions imposed on Iran, changes in the White House and in the US’ Middle East policy, the pandemic acted as one of many catalysts in the process of de-escalating tensions. Indeed, it had a significant financial and economic impact in the context of the announced Vision 2030 program to reduce Persian Gulf states dependence on oil, diversify its economies and develop public services sectors. If Arab Persian Gulf states want to implement it effectively, the authorities in Riyadh must attract foreign investors and thus limit the policy of military intervention in the region, which put a severe strain on the kingdom’s budget and international image. The pandemic alerted the Persian Gulf states that they should focus on shifting their economy away from dependence on natural resources towards international investment and the private sector.

The pandemic turned out to be a catalyst/accelerator for the strengthening of Sino-Arab relations in parallel with the transfer of power in the USA (Donald Trump replaced by Joe Biden) and the reevaluation of priorities in American foreign policy (democratic norms and values, fighting the pandemic at home, withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan) compared with the presidency of Donald Trump. Already in 2019, the energy interdependence between China and the GCC countries meant that their fuel exports there exceeded their fuel exports to the US, where shale production reduced the country’s dependence on GCC countries fivefold. However, there were more reasons for the beneficial Arab-Chinese cooperation.

First of all, the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at reactivating the Silk Road, provides opportunities for cooperation in the field of infrastructure and financial projects, economic diversification plans and renewable energy sources. The GCC countries are pressed for time, wanting to achieve as much as possible from the assumed economic reforms under the Vision 2030 programs. China not only efficiently neutralized the adverse effects of the pandemic in its own country by creating an image of an effective anti-COVID policy but also lacks the baggage of difficult historical experiences with the countries of the region that the US, which was involved in a series of conflicts with Arab states and Iran, has. Secondly, China has cooperated with the Persian Gulf states in the fight against the pandemic as part of the so-called Health Silk Road. China’s health policy is part of its foreign policy. The Middle Kingdom has provided aid to combat the pandemic to 150 countries and four international organizations, and Chinese experts have held videoconferences with over 170 countries. The large-scale international activity of China has become a challenge for the United States, confirming the rivalry between the two powers. It is also worth noting that the help in the fight against COVID-19 was not one-sided. The Middle East countries also helped China by sending millions of masks and other medical aid.


China indirectly referred to the theory of complex interdependence, recalling that in the times of globalization, the interests of all countries in the world are intertwined, and human society shares a common future.29

China also took advantage of the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and seized the initiative. This resulted in the signing of strategic partnerships with, *inter alia*, Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Sudan, Iraq, Morocco, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait and Djibouti. On the one hand, China imports crude oil and natural gas (nearly half of its imports come from the Persian Gulf). On the other hand, China supplies military equipment to Saudi Arabia (with which it conducts military exercises) and Iran (fighters and tanks). One of the reasons the Arab states in the Persian Gulf turned to China was the deterioration of relations with the US after the Arab Spring in the Obama era, but also as a result of such statements by Trump that argued that the Gulf states should take responsibility for their security. As a result, the gap between what the Gulf states expect from the United States and what Washington is willing to offer has widened, leading to a recalibration of their policies. Finally, medical assistance was an important argument in relations between the Persian Gulf states and China. China saw mask diplomacy as an opportunity to get rid of the label of the “creator of COVID-19” and gain an advantage over the US, which in the face of the global pandemic did little to prove its leadership position.

Regarding the US policy toward the MENA region, the USA conducts health diplomacy, providing financial aid to the region’s countries, as well as investing in disease prevention, laboratories and health care for Arab countries. That said, the US also focused on criticizing the authorities in Beijing, accusing them of creating the virus, and withdrawing support for the WHO. During President Trump’s term, the US concentrated on fighting the pandemic at home, while China launched an international campaign to support the fight against the virus.

While the US support is long-term in nature, China’s aid was mainly limited to providing medical resources and medical knowledge in the fight against the pandemic. Development aid in the form of building hospitals, debt relief, financial support or the provision of vaccines is an opportunity to strengthen China’s position, something that China has scrupulously used, while the MENA countries have expressed public recognition for the aid it provided.30

From the realist perspective, it seems surprising that cooperation rather than pure competition or conflict strengthens China’s position in the Persian Gulf. China does not use hard power instruments but economic, business and diplomatic methods to gain an advantage over the USA’s position in the Persian Gulf. It is clear that China’s growing power and influence in the Persian Gulf, seen at least since the Carter Doctrine as a sphere of American influence, will inevitably lead to Sino-American hostility and a classic power dilemma. China has already emerged as a primary economic trading partner with the states of the subregion. However, for the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the diversification of relations or balancing between these two powers seems to be the most attractive strategy. This new multipolar reality that includes US, Chinese and Russian interests in the subregion has pushed the major GCC states to adopt a strategic neutrality which we could see during the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022.31

Finally, it was not institutions but states that played a key role in fighting the pandemic. Economic interdependence, a fundamental tenet of liberalism, led to an accelerated transmission of the virus that was fought more often by bilateral agreements than by a multilateral system. This can be seen in the case of the United Arab Emirates, Iran or China, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. In domestic politics, the pandemic was used by authoritarian states to consolidate their power at home. On the other hand, in foreign policy, some countries (China, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) used humanitarian aid provided to other countries to strengthen their position in the international arena.

The Gulf Cooperation Council and its reaction to COVID-19
The GCC is a subregional organization aimed at political and economic integration. It was established in 1981 and comprises Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. Before briefly discussing the organization’s response to COVID-19, I would like to make two introductory remarks.

Firstly, authoritarian regionalism is closely linked with the assumptions of realism. The regionalism of the authoritarian states in the Middle East has different functions than the regionalism of democratic states in Europe. It is aimed at strengthening power and ensuring security rather than the region’s development or its citizens’ prosperity. The domination of particular interests and the existing disputes between the GCC member states often remained an obstacle on the way to effective regional cooperation.

Another important remark concerns the Saudi-Qatar diplomatic crisis that started on 5 June 5 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt (the countries of the so-called Anti-Terrorist Quartet) accused Qatar of supporting terrorist and religious groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, to destabilize the security states in the region. The countries of the so-called Anti-Terrorist Quartet severed diplomatic relations with

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30 Zoubir, “China’s ‘Health Silk Road’ Diplomacy in the MENA” 1–14.
Qatar and imposed sanctions on the country, including closing land, sea and air borders, breaking trade agreements, including for the supply of food, and closing their markets for goods from Qatar. In the end, the coercive diplomacy of the Quartet countries did not force any concessions from the Doha government. Qatar introduced an effective crisis management mechanism and a policy of adaptation to the new conditions of political and economic shock. This dispute inside the GCC was an important obstacle to taking effective measures in response to COVID-19, but at the same time, the pandemic crisis became a catalyst in the process of deescalating mutual tensions.

This mutual tension between the GCC member states was evident in the first phase of the pandemic, when in February 2020, Qatar Health Minister Hanan Muhammad al-Kuwari was not allowed to enter Saudi Arabia and, as a result, could not participate in a meeting devoted to the joint anti-COVID-19 response. In March, 31 Bahraini citizens flying from Iran were stuck in Qatar. Emir Tamim ibn Hamad al-Thani proposed to transport the Bahrainis by his private plane to Manam at his own expense. Bahrain rejected the offer and accused Qatar of exposing the passengers to infections and using Bahraini citizens in the dispute with the Kingdom.32 But an increasing wave of the pandemic and rising death indicator resulted in decreasing hostility against Qatar.

On 24 March, 2020, the health ministers of the member states held virtual consultations during which the need to ensure economic and maritime security, including ensuring the smooth supply of electricity and water, was emphasized. However, these virtual meetings did not lead to any specific action. The exceptions were measures taken by the member states to ensure a smooth supply of food. In mid-April 2020, the GCC countries established a food security network to ease the Qatar-Saudi crisis that has been ongoing since 2017. The GCC governments increased financial support for agricultural production, facilitated import procedures, strengthened supply chains and lifted restrictions on the movement of agricultural workers. As a result of these actions, the Gulf Arab states did not have to introduce limits on food purchases to counteract empty store shelves. The challenge for the Arab Gulf states, however, was to create their own food production, as currently most of their food products are imported.

The Council has failed to prepare crisis management plans to deal with pandemics after the MENA region struggled with similar threats, such as SARS-CoV, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) or the H1N1 virus a few years earlier. These experiences were not taken advantage of, for example, to create an appropriate infrastructure or mechanisms to counteract and respond to similar threats.

Regional institutions in the Persian Gulf did not play an important role in the fight against the pandemic, an argument that was found to be fundamental for the realism approach. Firstly, because it was seen primarily as a ‘national threat,’ actions at the state level had priority over regional cooperation. Secondly, cooperation under the GCC was affected by the diplomatic crisis in 2017. The national approach to fighting the pandemic prevailed over the regional approach in other parts of the world too. These arguments are an important part of the answer to the research question: why do states fail to cooperate in the pursuit of common interests?

In the times of the global pandemic crisis, the GCC played a minor role and showed poor decision-making in the face of the pandemic threat, demonstrating the predominance of individual states and bilateral relations over multilateral contacts. This low importance of regional institutions translates into weak regional cooperation between the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. This, in turn, leads to a conclusion that the existing regional institutions in the Persian Gulf represent a missed opportunity, especially in neutralizing threats, when collective action could unite divided states and counter similar crises more effectively.

Summary

The analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the policy of the Persian Gulf states outlined above confirms the hypothesis formulated in this article that the pandemic became a catalyst for decisions and political actions in the domestic and foreign policy of Arab states. To verify the hypothesis, I put two research questions: 1) Why did the Persian Gulf states decide to pursue a non-cooperative internal policy, and what results has it produced? and 2) How has the consolidation and strengthening of authoritarian regimes influenced the foreign policy of the Persian Gulf states?

When answering the first question we must recall the specifics of the Arab political culture. One of the characteristic feature of this culture is limited trust (fundamental realism assumption). Similar to limited regionalism in the Arab world that derives from the reluctance to transfer loyalty, expectations, and political activity to a supranational level, during the pandemic period authoritarian states were afraid that international institutions could interfere in their internal affairs or impose specific regulations or regimes. Additionally, cooperation within the GCC was affected by the diplomatic crisis in 2017 and a national approach to fighting the pandemic prevailed over the regional approach. The domination of national response to the pandemic threat has allowed Arab leaders to strengthen the prerogatives of the authorities, introduce extraordinary measures and efforts to fight the pandemic, integrate humanitarian aid into foreign policy, and strengthen certain countries’ position, both in the region and beyond. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf enacted some of the strictest measures in the world, including location-based contract tracing, prison sentences for breaking the law, suspending pilgrimages, and closing religious sites. Electronic tags linked to the phones of COVID-19 victims
bring to mind the tracking of criminals, a thought-provoking and very insightful comparison. Repressive mechanisms are commonplace in the Persian Gulf, where police control the public sphere and limit civil and political rights. The GCC states are aware of the threat of information control and have already learned how to use it for their purposes. The GCC states were the victims and proponents of the propaganda and misinformation campaigns that often led to disputes and information warfare. In Arab authoritarian states, information is a weapon that enables states to monopolize truth and use it to consolidate power. As an example, it is sufficient to point to the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, triggered by the publication of alleged words by the Sheikh of Qatar that he supported terrorist organizations and Iran. The sheikh of Qatar denied these words; however, the so-called Antiterrorist Quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) severed relations with Qatar and imposed sanctions on the emirate. COVID-19 became another cause to empower its authority over society and strengthen its legitimacy.

Regarding the second research question: how has the consolidation and strengthening of authoritarian regimes influenced the foreign policy of the Persian Gulf states? I have showed in the article that the pandemic provided an opportunity for de-escalation between the UAE and Saudi Arabia with Iran (the state most affected by COVID-19 in the Middle East) or even to rebuild regional order. I also showed that China’s growing interests in the Persian Gulf collide with those of the US while giving Arab states additional options to balance these two superpowers. China is gaining influence in the subregion at the United States’ expense and achieving the status of a powerful actor in the Middle East. A few years ago, the Persian Gulf was perceived to be solely within the American sphere of influence, but today it has become important for China as well to implement win-win partnerships with Persian Gulf states (for example, Chinese investments in infrastructure of $20 billion and $3 billion in loans for the banking sector)14. Above analysis has led to the conclusion that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic and foreign policy. According to this report, COVID-19 contributed to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, which took up the fight against the pandemic largely without assistance and cooperation with other states and international institutions. At the same time, the pandemic directed their foreign policy also towards authoritarian states (China), although it was more concerned with economic policy and less with the fight against the pandemic.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the GCC states in fighting COVID-19, they fared better than other countries in the Middle East due to their more advanced healthcare systems and constant cash flows from selling crude oil/natural gas to mitigate the economic damage. It can be viewed as the Persian Gulf states’ modus operandi to cope with the virus: crisis management based on measures to secure the regimes, provide financial support for their societies and protect the economy. While benefiting from the sanitary restrictions, authoritarian states faced the economic challenge caused by COVID-19, such as a sudden decline in global oil demand and a drop in oil prices from $75 a barrel in January 2020 to $20 per barrel in May 202015. The fall in oil demand slashed economic growth and alerted the oil monarchies to step up efforts to diversify their economies.

The application of insights from neoclassical realism helped answer research questions about the relations between authoritarian political system and domestic and foreign policies in the face of the threat (pandemic). Realism is the theory with a greater explanatory potential for illuminating the behavior of states under the threat of a pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the dominance of state actors in international relations vis-à-vis regional institutions. It was also used to strengthen countries’ position in the international arena, especially by the UAE and China. The humanitarian aid provided by these countries may constitute a springboard for further investments. The pandemic also brought many challenges and threats, at least during its initial period, such as the economic crisis (e.g. the oil crisis), the lack of preparation to fight the pandemic (e.g. in Iran) or the limitation of multilateral cooperation (e.g. within institutions). Because if a common threat, the COVID-19 pandemic, can’t spark cooperation in the region, then what can?