

The Persian Gulf's Strategic Triangle

*The relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia from
1969 to 2014 under Neoclassical Realism*

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The Persian Gulf's Strategic Triangle: the relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia from 1969 to 2014 under Neoclassical Realism

Summary: Iran and Saudi Arabia are today the two most influential countries in the Persian Gulf, and their foreign behaviour is strongly linked to how they perceive the role of the United States in the region. Nevertheless, a glance at the specialized literature on the International Relations of the Middle East (IRME) indicates a lack of studies exploring these three relations together in a single theoretical framework. Thus, this thesis asks how these three countries can be studied as a strategic triangle, meaning they share highly interdependent relations that affect their international behaviour, exploring the characteristics of this triangle and how it changes through time. For that, I examine their grand strategies from 1969 to 2014, arguing that their decision-making process is so interlinked that a change in one dyad (for example, Iran-Saudi Arabia) has effects on the other two. Hence, I challenge the scholarly tendency to examine state-state relations only on the bilateral level by building a triangular framework that investigates the three together and at the same analytical level of scrutinization.

I employ Neoclassical Realism (NCR) as the theoretical framework and use case studies analysis and process tracing as the methodological choice. NCR sustains that while power distribution within the system conditions international politics, unit-level factors shape and mould a state's behaviour, enabling different reactions to similar systemic stimuli. Via NCR, I developed the following explanative chain: contextualized power (independent variable) →, status satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives (intervening variables) → strategic triangle (the dependent variable). I applied this chain to four different periods: 1969-1979; 1979-1990; 1990-2003, and 2003-2014. Each period represents a balance of power alteration within the Persian Gulf, changing the dynamics of the triangulation. These periods represented my four case study chapters, in which I described the triangle's characteristics and tendencies. These case studies confirmed my hypotheses, which are: the first triangle is a menage à trois (all relations are positive), the second a stable marriage (connections between the US and Saudi Arabia are positive as theirs with Iran is negative), the third, a romantic triangle (Saudis have positive ties with the other two, which continue enemies), and the fourth is a revised stable marriage (US-Saudi Arabia positive, Saudi-Iran and US-Iran are negative).

My decision to employ NCR to explore this topic also concerns the axiological goal of inserting the thesis into the Global IR movement, which criticizes the Western bias within most of the International Relations mainstream. Exploring an IRME's topic via NCR aims to bring the Realist paradigm closer to the Global IR movement while reducing Middle East Studies (MES) isolation from the centre of IR theorization. I concluded that the complexity of the three countries' relationship is indeed better grasped through the strategic triangle construct. Moreover, the thesis brings key empirical findings that contribute to questions about the regional system and theoretical results about the utility of NCR, the importance of ideational, cognitive, and leadership factors for the case, and the advantages of exploring state-state relations in more complex arrangements such as triangulation.

Key words: Strategic Triangle; USA; Iran; Saudi Arabia; Neoclassical Realism; Persian Gulf.

Das strategische Dreieck am Persischen Golf: die Beziehungen zwischen den Vereinigten Staaten, dem Iran und Saudi-Arabien von 1969 bis 2014 im Rahmen des neoklassischen Realismus

Zusammenfassung: Der Iran und Saudi-Arabien sind heute die beiden einflussreichsten Länder am Persischen Golf, und ihr außenpolitisches Verhalten ist stark davon abhängig, wie sie die Rolle der Vereinigten Staaten in der Region wahrnehmen. Ein Blick auf die Fachliteratur zu den Internationalen Beziehungen im Nahen Osten (IRME) zeigt jedoch, dass es an Studien mangelt, die diese drei Beziehungen in einem einzigen theoretischen Rahmen untersuchen. In dieser Arbeit wird daher der Frage nachgegangen, wie diese drei Länder als strategisches Dreieck untersucht werden können, d. h. sie haben stark voneinander abhängige Beziehungen, die ihr internationales Verhalten beeinflussen, und es wird untersucht, welche Merkmale dieses Dreieck aufweist und wie es sich im Laufe der Zeit verändert. Zu diesem Zweck untersuche ich ihre Strategien von 1969 bis 2014 und argumentiere, dass ihre Entscheidungsprozesse so eng miteinander verknüpft sind, dass eine Veränderung in einer Dyade (z. B. Iran-Saudi-Arabien) Auswirkungen auf die anderen beiden hat. Daher stelle ich die wissenschaftliche Tendenz in Frage, die Beziehungen zwischen Staat und Staat nur auf bilateraler Ebene zu untersuchen, indem ich einen dreieckigen Rahmen aufbaue, der die drei Dyaden zusammen und auf derselben analytischen Ebene untersucht.

Ich verwende den Neoklassischen Realismus (NKR) als theoretischen Rahmen und setze Fallstudienanalyse und Prozessverfolgung als methodologische Wahl ein. Der Neoklassische Realismus geht davon aus, dass zwar die Machtverteilung innerhalb des Systems die internationale Politik bestimmt, dass aber Faktoren auf der Ebene der einzelnen Einheiten das Verhalten eines Staates formen und prägen und unterschiedliche Reaktionen auf ähnliche systemische Stimuli ermöglichen. Über die NCR entwickelte ich die folgende Erklärungskette: kontextualisierte Macht (unabhängige Variable) → Statuszufriedenheit, Regimeidentität und außenpolitische Führungskräfte (intervenierende Variablen) → strategisches Dreieck (die abhängige Variable). Ich habe diese Kette auf vier verschiedene Zeiträume angewandt: 1969-1979; 1979-1990; 1990-2003 und 2003-2014. Jeder Zeitraum steht für eine Veränderung des Machtgleichgewichts am Persischen Golf, die die Dynamik der Dreiecksbeziehung verändert. Diese Zeiträume stellten meine vier Fallstudienkapitel dar, in denen ich die Merkmale und Tendenzen des Dreiecks beschrieb. Diese Fallstudien bestätigten meine Hypothesen: Das erste Dreieck ist eine Menage à trois (alle Beziehungen sind positiv), das zweite eine stabile Ehe (die Beziehungen zwischen den USA und Saudi-Arabien sind positiv, während die Beziehungen zum Iran negativ sind), das dritte eine romantische Dreiecksbeziehung (die Saudis haben positive Beziehungen zu den beiden anderen, die weiterhin verfeindet sind) und das vierte eine revidierte stabile Ehe (die Beziehungen zwischen den USA und Saudi-Arabien sind positiv, die Beziehungen zwischen Saudi-Arabien und Iran und den USA und Iran sind negativ).

Meine Entscheidung, NCR zur Untersuchung dieses Themas zu verwenden, hat auch mit dem axiologischen Ziel zu tun, die These in die globale IR-Bewegung einzubringen, die die westliche Voreingenommenheit innerhalb des größten Teils des Mainstreams der Internationalen Beziehungen kritisiert. Das Ziel, ein IRME-Thema mittels NCR zu erforschen, besteht darin, das realistische Paradigma näher an die globale IR-Bewegung heranzuführen und gleichzeitig die Isolierung der Middle East Studies (MES) vom Zentrum der IR-Theorie zu verringern. Ich bin zu dem Schluss gekommen, dass die Komplexität der Beziehungen zwischen den drei Ländern durch das Konstrukt des strategischen Dreiecks tatsächlich besser erfasst werden kann. Darüber hinaus liefert die Arbeit wichtige empirische Erkenntnisse, die zu Fragen über das regionale System und zu theoretischen Erkenntnissen über den Nutzen von NCR, die Bedeutung ideeller, kognitiver und führungstechnischer Faktoren für den Fall und die Vorteile der Untersuchung von Staat-Staat-Beziehungen in komplexeren Arrangements wie Triangulation beitragen.

Schlüsselwörter: Strategisches Dreieck; USA; Iran; Saudi-Arabien; Neoklassischer Realismus; Persischer Golf..

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Abbreviations

ARAMCO	Saudi Arabian Oil Company
AWACS	Airborn Warning and Control System
BP	British Petroleum
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CIA	Central of Intelligence Agency
CoW	Correlates of War
EIA	Energy Information Agency
FPE	Foreign Policy Executives
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ILSA	Iran Libya Sanctions Act
IMF	International Monetary Funds
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRME	International Relations of the Middle East
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MES	Middle East Studies
MEK	Mojahedin-e Khalq
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
NSC	National Security Council
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting countries
RDF	Rapid Deployment Force

RSAF	Royal Saudi Air Force
SOCAL	Standard Oil Company of California
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
URSS	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
US	United States
WB	World Bank
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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1. Introduction

Today, Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two most influential countries in the Persian Gulf. They are rich in oil resources, with a significant geostrategic position, their regimes are relatively stable, and they invest considerably in military forces (Cordesman et al. 2014). Today, both are entangled in several Middle Eastern political affairs, influencing outcomes and increasing their influence. They often employ ideological or identitarian tools to increase their predominance and leverage while lessening the other's (Rich 2012; Mabon 2016; Saikal 2016). Their competition for leadership is intrinsically connected to the United States' role in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia sustains positive and security-leaning relations with Washington, endorsing the latter's involvement in the region (Pollack 2002; Lippman 2011; Riedel 2018). Conversely, since 1979, Iran has been utterly against US interference in the region, arguing it increases instability (Musavian 2014; Colleau 2016; Kinch 2016).

Since the 1980s, the United States has proactively participated in the Persian Gulf's militarization and weaponization (Niblock and Hook 2015; Lesch and Haas 2018; Sick 2018). It gradually increased its security ties with most regional actors under the clout of protecting the oil market and local stability, consolidating a military presence capable of swiftly projecting force. Directly or indirectly, the United States was involved in all the contemporary wars that tainted the region: the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, the 1990 Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq invasion and subsequent civil war, and the 2014-2017 clash against the Islamic State. Hence, it behaves as an extra-regional actor in the Persian Gulf, with well-defined interests, strategies, and securitarian preferences (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018). Nevertheless, its political activities are also characterized by a long-standing friendship with Saudi Arabia and hostility towards Iran. While some presidents have tried to change these dynamics, they seem resilient, continuously shaping much of the geopolitical dynamics.

This thesis investigates the relationship between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. It questions *if the three countries can be studied via a strategic triangle analytical model, and, if so, what are the characteristics of this triangle, how does it change throughout time, and what can it inform about the relational tendencies between the actors?* I examine the three countries' grand strategies from 1969 to 2014 to argue that their decision-making process is interlinked, in the sense that a change in one dyad (Iran-Saudi Arabia, for example) can affect the other two (US-Saudi Arabia and US-Iran). In other words, I contend that their regional

behavior has been interconnected for decades. Hence, this study challenges the scholarly tendency to examine state-state relations only on the bilateral level by building a triangular framework that explores the three countries' activities in the region together. The goal is to show that much nuance, detail, and specification are gained by considering them entangled in a strategic triangular relationship.

This study is a project in International Relations of the Middle East (IRME) aiming at the relations of three major actors in the Persian Gulf through a combined framework that demonstrates their triangular relationship as a characteristic of the regional system. I assume that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States play the regional political game according to the balance of power and ideational motivations, cognitive orientations, and leadership preferences. For that, I employ Neoclassical Realism (NCR), a strain of the Realist School that explores how internal elements shape political behavior. NCR sustains that while power distribution within the system conditions international politics, unit-level factors shape and mold states' behavior, enabling different reactions to similar systemic stimuli. Thus, it calls for opening the state's black box while keeping core Realist tenets about the anarchical structure.

This introductory chapter has six sections. It first presents the topic and the literature background it is built upon, justifying the topic's relevance. The second section discusses the research's focus, presenting the thesis's temporal analytical scope and the targeted scholarly communities. In a nutshell, the thesis has three academic ambitions: to reduce the Middle East's neglect from the International Relations (IR) mainstream; to transform the Realist paradigm via Global South cases and its particularities; to promote interdisciplinary dialogue between Middle East Studies (MES) and IR. The third section presents the contributions and relevance. A discussion of the objectives, research question, and hypothesis is in the fourth section. The fifth section delves into the methodology and data selection. Finally, I present the study's outline.

1.1 Topic and Background

The Persian Gulf is a body of water in Western Asia that touches seven countries: Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman. For centuries, this region has been vital for international politics. Ancient empires fought to take hold of the territory; its port cities belonged to trading routes connecting the Middle East to India, East Africa, and Asia; European powers built protectorates there to benefit from its strategic location; and, since the first large oil field was discovered in 1908, foreign companies transformed the region into a

crucial component of the capitalist system (Yetiv 2008; Potter 2009; Ulrichsen 2017). Moreover, international intervention, military coups, revolutions, tribal rivalry, transnational identities, and state wars permeated the region's political history.

Hence, the region has called the attention of IR scholars for a plethora of reasons. Historical approaches highlight the region's permeability and its political development combined with the core-peripheral international division (Hurewitz 1972; Fain 2008; Peterson 2009). Theoretical explanations for the systemic configuration range from complex constructivist analysis (Adib-Moghaddam 2006) to eclectic combinations of Realism and identity elements (Gause 2010; Smith 2016; Gause and Legrenzi 2016) and oil geopolitics (Barnes and Jaffe 2006; Jones 2010; Grey 2017; Krane 2019). Within the IR literature, one finds rich analyses of regional power relations (Fürtig 2002; Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018) and studies expanding the frontiers of theoretical concepts such as security dilemma and securitization (Kamrava 2011; Lawson 2011; Ulrichsen 2015; Mabon 2016).

The literature mostly agrees that the Persian Gulf, a sub-regional system within the Middle East, has been multipolar since its formation on the eve of the 1970s (Fürtig 2002; Buzan and Waeber 2003; Gause 2010; Kamrava 2011; Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018). Nevertheless, if one ought to take a snapshot of the Persian Gulf today, she would immediately detect the prominence of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Iran has long promoted itself as a regional leader due to its size, population, and long-standing history (Abrahamian 2008; Ehteshami 2014; Juneau 2015; Saikal 2019). Moreover, its convoluted relations with the West and Israel, polemic nuclear program, and revolutionary and anti-imperialist rhetoric have often put the country in the spotlight of international discussions. In its turn, Saudi Arabia has boosted its political weight in the Middle East in the 2010s, assuming an increasingly proactive role in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Lebanon (Al-Sudairi 2015; Partrick 2016; Karim 2017; Gause 2018). An oil producer powerhouse with the sole capacity to shift prices according to its interests, Saudi Arabia also has one of the world's most significant military expenditures, identifying itself as a country that cannot be overlooked.

Concomitantly, the United States holds the most advanced military capabilities deployable in the Persian Gulf and shares economic and strategic relations with most local countries but Iran (Yetiv 2008; Beck 2014; Sick 2018). It has been implicated in many conflicts under the justification of protecting regional stability, a role that became explicit with the 1980s

Carter Doctrine. Thus, the United States has been an active player in the Persian Gulf's geopolitical game (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 8; Buzan 2009, p. 45; Edwards 2013). Therefore, the remaining regional actors (Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, and Iraq) seek ways to balance the interest of Iran and Saudi Arabia with their own securitarian and economic ties with the United States. This way, it is rather impossible to discuss the region's international relations without bringing Tehran, Riyadh, and Washington into the analysis.

These countries' relations are multifaceted and often thorny, reflecting their divergent interests, political natures, and ambitions. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two mirrored-opposed theocracies, promoting vastly different political-religious leadership styles. Iran's political ethos is revolutionary, systemic revisionist, and Islamist (Mohammadi 2012; Saikal 2016). It diverges from most of its neighbors for being Shia, Persian and against the US's political influence in the region. Conversely, Saudi Arabian monarchical rule is highly dependent on maintaining the domestic and regional status quo (Al-Rasheed 2010; Gause 2018). An Arab, Wahhabi, and conservative country hosting two Islamic sacred places, Saudi Arabia holds for itself a position of distinction among the world's Muslim community. Today's competition for hearts and minds between Iran and Saudi Arabia goes beyond traditional definitions of hegemony-seeking behavior, as they capitalize on ideological, religious, and ethnic factors to elaborate their narratives of preeminence (Keynoush 2016; Mabon 2016; Hiro 2018).

The US's relations with both regional countries are complex topics full of myths and oversimplified definitions. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran went from a strategic ally to the most prominent foe, creating an environment where one accuses the other of being the greatest insecurity threat in the Middle East (Beeman 2005; Blight et al. 2012; Seliktar 2012). A series of misunderstandings, escalations, and hostility created an enmity discourse between Americans and Iranians that has been hard to overcome (Jones 2011; Adib-Moghaddam 2012). Simultaneously, as the US-Iran relationship crumbled, the friendship of convenience between Washington and Riyadh increased (Luke 1985; Pollack 2002; Lippman 2004). Despite their very distinct political tenets, the US's and Saudi's interests in the Persian Gulf converged, as both expected to safeguard order, avoid disturbance to the oil markets, and check any local hegemony (Bronson 2006; Partrick 2016).

However, Iran and Saudi Arabia have not always been rivals, having already collaborated for regional stability in different moments (Bahgat 2000; Cook and Rawshandil

2009; Seliktar 2012). In the 1970s, Riyadh and Tehran aligned with the US's goal of checking the Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf (Alvandi 2012; Cooper 2012). From the 1990s until 2005, they shared a *détente* period in which they worked together for a win-win regional political scenario (Bahgat 2000; Okruhlik 2003). Conversely, the pragmatic partnership between Washington and Riyadh has been shaken a few times, but never to a level that harmed their pursuit of shared interests (Lippman 2004; Riedel 2018). Finally, Iran and the United States had moments of limited strategic settlement despite not sharing diplomatic ties (Parsi 2017; Ansari 2006; El-Khawas 2011). Moreover, since the 1990s, presidencies from both countries (apart from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, 2005-2013) have attempted to reduce tensions at least once. Some of these efforts, such as the 2001 Bonn conference, were supported by the Saudis, whereas others, such as the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), were not.

Despite a visible degree of interconnectivity between these three countries, the literature remains concentrated only on the relations bilaterally. Most of those investigating the Iran-Saudi relationship, for example, included the US's role as a factor or a part of the contextualization rather than an extra-regional actor actively playing the geopolitical game (Al Toraifi 2012; Hiro 2018; Ghattas 2020). Others chose a 'US and the region' approach, avoiding scrutinizing the United States at the same level as the local states (Pollack 2005; Pressman 2009; Hook 2015), implying that Washington is the only rational actor who does not need to have its ideologies, identities, and affiliations examined. Only a few have mentioned the need to treat Washington as a system member that impacts and is impacted by local politics (Fürting 2007; Aarts and van Duijne 2009; Keynoush 2016), but a model for this analysis is yet to be offered.

Therefore, this thesis aims to study the three countries' interactions together, replacing the dyadic analytical lens with a triangular one. Critical events within one dyad are assumed to directly link with the other two bilateral ones. In the 1970s, President Nixon (1969-1974) elaborated a strategy for the Persian Gulf that included both Iran and Saudi Arabia, despite Iran being much stronger. President Clinton's (1993-2001) policy of isolating Iran obstructed the Saudi-Iranian *détente* throughout the 1990s. President Obama (2009-2017) pledged his support to Saudi Arabia in the 2015 Yemeni war to appease the monarchy while the JCPOA was implemented. This list is not exhaustive and reflects a complexity between these three countries worth investigating. Does a triangular framework exploring the relations between an extra-regional power and two competitive regional actors offer more information than was previously

hidden? Can a study about how interconnected their grand strategies are give us new knowledge about systemic characteristics? These preliminary inquiries drive the thesis forward.

1.2 Research scope and focus

The research examines the three countries' grand strategies from 1969 to 2014, outlining how they are interconnected. This study's operationalization is through Neoclassical Realism and has a soft positivist ontology and epistemology, in the sense that it seeks an objective truth while aware of the limitations of doing social scientific research and the unattainability of neutral research (Ripsman et al. 2016; Meibauer 2020). The thesis is also part of the Global IR movement, which aims to internationalize the discipline, promote dialogue between existing traditions, and investigate how concepts are applied, modified, and expanded in the Global South (Acharya 2014; Buzan and Acharya 2019). Thus, the thesis offers an ethical axiological approach to science because the results seek to engage with research values and paradigms, aiming to contribute to, or even transform, the disciplinary debate's progress.

The temporal analytical scope is broad, from 1969 to 2014, as it seeks to define different patterns of triangular relations between the countries. The starting point is 1969, as the literature agrees that the Persian Gulf developed into a system when the British ended their protectorate, and the Trucial States became independent countries (Buzan and Waever 2003; Peterson 2009; Gause 2010). Since the 1970s, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar share preoccupations about the local order, and each country connects its security with the others' behavior. Moreover, during this period, the United States elaborated its first specific policy on the Persian Gulf, the Twin Pillar Diplomacy (1969-1979). In the 1980s, the Carter Doctrine replaced that policy and increased the US's role in the region. Since then, the US's involvement in the region only grew in scope and commitment throughout the decades.

NCR poses an efficient framing for the study because it stands at the midway of IR theorizing – between systemic determinism and internal determinism (Ripsman et al. 2016, pp. 8–9). This approach argues that the distribution of power between actors in an international system conditions their relations but does not determine their specificities. Instead, one must examine states' internal elements that shape and define international phenomena –foreign policies, grand strategies, or systemic outcomes (Zakaria 1998; Rathbun 2008; Sterling-Folker 2009; Reichwein 2012; Foulon 2015; Kitchen 2016; Meibauer 2020). Furthermore, the NCR approach has loose paradigmatic boundaries that enable the researcher to produce creative

research designs to investigate complex phenomena, such as a triangular relationship. Thus, I developed an NCR model in which the regional balance of power combines with unit-level factors related to status, identity, and leadership to explain the triangular relationship.

This theory has a deductive reasoning method that elaborates explanative chains, something crucial when dealing with massive amounts of information. In these chains, systemic factors are independent variables creating conditions for action, while unit-level factors are intervening variables, mediating and redirecting systemic signals into policies (Layne 2006; Kitchen 2010; Meibauer 2020). Thus, NCR bridges the spatial divide in IR theory (the domestic and the international levels), as well as the cognitive (matter and ideas) and the temporal (the past and the present) divisions without losing theoretical replicability and methodological rigor (Foulon 2015, p. 636). This way, it has the needed tools for exploring the complex interactions between the three states and their effect on the region system while also facilitating analytical models that can be replicable and comparable.

This approach's paradigmatic boundaries also enable Realist research to be assimilated into the Global IR movement (Acharya 2014; Buzan and Acharya 2019; Foulon and Meibauer 2020). This movement criticizes the Western bias ingrained within most IR mainstream that hampers the discipline's capability to integrate voices, ideas, and cases from outside the center of knowledge production (Alejandro 2019; Bilgin 2008; Gelardi 2019). Global IR suggests advancing the discipline by inclusion and reimagination, embracing academic power diffusion, and reducing intellectual barriers between the West and the Global South.

This thesis is a Global IR initiative due to three research focuses. The *first focus* is on reducing the intellectual neglect of the International Relations of the Middle East, bringing the region closer to the center of the disciplinary discussions. For decades, the Middle East had been pushed away from theory-building as it was perceived as too unique to be compared to other regions (Valbjørn 2004b; Teti 2007; Fawcett 2020). I focus on overcoming this tendency by producing an innovative, theoretically driven, and replicable framework that can be expanded to other cases. The *second focus* is to broaden the NCR's scope of inquiry by incorporating localized perception from the Global South. NCR is still mostly Western, with only a few studies exploring Global South countries (Foulon and Meibauer 2020). On a bigger picture, this thesis' exercise of exploring local actors' grand strategies contributes to reconsidering and transforming the Realist intellectual canon, making it less Western-dominated. The *third focus* is on

interdisciplinarity, as I assume that IR interaction with area studies is necessary to define variables and account for historical elements. The interface between IR theory and the Middle East Studies' knowledge enables an analytical model with contextuality and positionality, combining disciplinary cross-cutting theories with rich explorations about the region.

The thesis's *research scope* is the three countries' grand strategies and their effects on the regional system from 1969 to 2014. Grand strategy is how decision-makers assess national interests, threats, and resources to rank international policy priorities and outline a plan to meet these goals (Dueck 2006). Thus, grand strategies reflect the processes in which policy-makers survey the geostrategic environment, paying attention to the situations of their state and other actors' likely responses (Onea 2021, p. 9). The study covers how Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States assess the regional system and evaluate each other's behaviors to define their policies. I argue that the triangular relationship between the two countries is a *systemic characteristic* of the Persian Gulf, expanding our understanding of the region and how systemic change affects state-state relations and grand strategy motivations.

In conclusion, the thesis dialogues with three scholarly communities. First, it is in the interest of *IR theory*, particularly to the NCR community and those interested in grand strategy theorization. The thesis emphasizes theory building, outlining an NCR model that compartmentalizes and contextualizes regional and extra-regional actors' powers while systematically adding ideational, cognitive, and leadership variables. Second, it concerns the *Global IR movement*, as it can offer a path to reinvigorate the Realist research program by reducing its parsimony and increasing its explanatory value, producing knowledge that is in line with the reality outside the West. Here, the NCR added value is enabling creative research designs that embrace Realist themes while seeking context-specific insights and dialoguing with other disciplinary fields. Finally, the thesis contributes to the *International Relations of the Middle East* (IRME) by exploring a timely topic with political and strategic relevance while assessing the material and non-material elements that determine ongoing geopolitics. Thus, the thesis builds upon the in-depth and complex analysis and further advances IRME.

1.3 Contribution and Relevance

This thesis is relevant to the intellectual project of *interdisciplinarity*, mainly by interfacing Area Studies and International Relations (Ahram et al. 2018; Aris 2020). Like many other multidisciplinary subfields, an intellectual divide exists in the International Relations of

the Middle East: some scholars have an IR background, and others have an MES one. This area-discipline division relates to knowledge power, politics within disciplinary fields, and expertise experiences outside the Euro-American center. It also reproduces an artificial division of labor between specialists and generalists. By following these divisions, area scholars often become blinded by local particularities, avoiding producing theories or concepts that can travel beyond their case studies. Simultaneously, IR scholars can be blinded to any idiosyncrasies not visible in the West, ignoring how regions contribute to the discipline's progress (Valbjørn 2004b, p. 53).

Criticizing this artificial division, Global IR calls for area studies to be brought back to the discipline's theory-making (Hurrell 2016; Buzan and Acharya 2019). By interacting with Area Studies, Social Scientists from different backgrounds can dialogue with each other and seek new cases, voices and interpretations (Nicolaidis 2020). This thesis provides an extensive literature review that combines rich, in-depth knowledge about Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States with disciplinary concepts such as grand strategy, status, environmental restrictiveness, regime identities, and balance of power. Thus, I work in both fields' interface, profiting from IR's cross-cutting theories and regional studies' valuable contextual analysis. Therefore, I aim toward a plural study that communicates with both area studies and IR, delivering a two-way conversation in which both fields learn from each other.

Second, the thesis is also relevant for *internationalizing the Realist school*, expanding its scope of inquiry. Among the traditional IR paradigms, Realism is repeatedly put in the spotlight for its Western bias, which excludes other phenomena, actors, and voices outside the center of knowledge production (Hoffman 1977; Bilgin 2008; Wæver and Tickner 2009; Schenoni and Escudé 2016; Buzan and Acharya 2019). If IR's inquiry object is the interaction between actors in a supra-national context, different regions are expected to produce different traditions for understanding these realities. Global IR's research agenda aims to pluralize any paradigm, including the Realist one. According to Buzan and Acharya (2019, p. 303), Global IR promotes the displacement of IR knowledge from its Western hegemony into a broader global context, proposing a pluralistic approach to theory and method independent of the scholars' paradigmatic preferences.

Neoclassical Realism is a rethinking and reassessment of what Realism can do and how (Sterling-Folker 2021). Some argue that NCR's project aims to prioritize midrange theorizing

and empirical puzzles, explaining foreign policy (Rathbun 2008; Juneau 2015) or grand strategy change (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006). Others state that NCR offers a theory of international relations (Ripsman et al. 2016; Kitchen 2021). I maintain that diversity is one of NCR's biggest strengths as it embraces plurality. By employing NCR frameworks to Global South regions, Realist scholars can adapt, broaden their concepts, recalibrate their paradigmatic boundaries, and expand analytical horizons. This exercise would make the Realist school more in touch with reality outside the West, opening space to overcome its tendency to marginalize non-Western ideas and cases. Hence, the NCR's employment in this thesis contributes to pluralizing the Realist school, bringing it closer to the Global IR movement, and reducing IRME's ostracization from general IR theory-building.

Finally, the thesis contributes by making IR research *relevant for policymaking* for any actor doing politics in the Persian Gulf. The geopolitical events concerning the three countries are of timely relevance, and a theoretically informed study of their relational patterns can inform many decisions. Today, Iran and Saudi Arabia are often described as regional powers entrapped in a competition in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon (Terrill 2011; Hiro 2018; Ghattas 2020). A war or a prolonged escalation between the two can have spillover effects over the region, affecting millions of lives and the capitalist economy. Concomitantly, since the 2003 war in Iraq, many Americans have struggled to find a new, sustainable strategy for the region (Anthony 2015; Bahgat and Sharp 2014; Kitchen 2016). While regional stability will remain central to the US' economic and defense policies for years to come (Juneau 2014; Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 80), many disagree over which role Washington ought to assume. Undeniably, it is crucial to understand the past and its entrapments to create new policies. This thesis illuminates questions about the processes that drove the United States to assume a role with regional stability responsibilities and the sources and venues of Iran-Saudi hostilities.

Often described as a 'theory of mistakes' (Schweller 2004; Juneau 2015), NCR sheds light on the many domestic elements that drive countries not to act as rationalist theories expect them to. Therefore, the thesis poses a framework to grasp the ideational, ideological, and perceptual factors that shape these countries' relations, offering insights that can be included in policymaking processes – about how to proceed and how not to. It also gives special attention to perception and leadership skills as elements defining grand strategizing while operationalizing these elements into a model that grasps their impacts on policy outcomes. Thus,

the thesis enables more complex thinking on policymaking, orienting conclusions via not what it ought to be but what indeed has been so far.

1.4 Research Question, Objectives, and Hypothesis

This thesis aims to study the relations of three major actors in the Persian Gulf system – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States – in a single IR analytical framework that explores how their activities in the region are interconnected. The goal is to show that much nuance, detail, and specification are gained by considering that these three countries are entangled in a strategic triangular relationship. I intend to develop a combined framework that integrates these three bilateral relations, presenting their triangular relationship as a characteristic of the regional system. Thus, the study touches base with regional order debates, complex relational concepts, power competition, and extra-regional powers' roles.

There is a literature gap regarding examining these three countries at the same analytical level or comparing their motivations and choices as three regional players. For example, when the focus is on Iran and Saudi Arabia relations, the United States is often relegated as an element affecting the two regional actors, not an active participant in the system. Conversely, when the study concentrates on the US's relations in the region, it tends to ignore how the US's own internal attributes impact behavior, scrutinizing only how ideology, identity, or state-society dynamics condition local actors. Hence, while much is written about the security-for-oil-driven alliance between Riyadh and Washington, the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh, and the enmity between Americans and Iranians, few considered how interconnected these dyads are.

That is precisely where this thesis inserts itself: the objective is to develop a triangular framework to analyze the dyads together that approach the three simultaneously and uniformly. The US's behavior in the region is conditioned by the balance of power and certain unit-level factors, as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia. This research assumes that the three actors play the regional political game according to their power, ideational motivations, cognitive orientations, and leadership preferences. Moreover, I suggest the triangle unites the three actors' behaviors: a change in a bilateral relationship composing the triangle can spill over and alter the other two.

The thesis expects to answer the following questions: *how can the interactions between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States fit into a strategic triangle model? Can this framework illuminate features that are not clear when analyzing each bilateral relationship separately? If so, which types of triangular relations had these countries already shared?*

As a primary ignition to the discussion, I take on Dittmer's (1981, 2014) definition of a strategic triangle as a game between three actors in which changes between state A and B influence how state C interacts with A and B and vice-versa. This analytical construct is an exploratory venture to generate hypotheses and stimulate more systematic thinking about relational patterns (Dittmer 1981, p. 485). It considers that there are four patterns of exchange relationships: (i) 'Ménage à trois,' where the three parts have positive relations; (ii) 'Romantic Triangle,' where a country has positive relations with the other two parties but the two have negative relations; (iii) 'Stable Marriage,' where two countries have a stable positive relation but have a negative relationship with the third party; and (iv) 'Unit-Veto Triangle,' where there is no positive relationship between them.

I build on these four patterns to generate hypotheses about the types of triangular relations Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States shared. Using it as a frame for analytical examination and not as a theoretically informed concept, the thesis posits that the three actors had shared different types of triangulation between 1969 and 2014. The triangles vary accordingly to five systemic events that had altered the regional balance of power, which are:

- The creation of the regional system when the *British Empire withdrew* from the Persian Gulf on the eve of the 1970s;
- The *Iranian Islamic Revolution* of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988);
- The end of the Cold War and the *Iraq invasion of Kuwait* in 1990;
- The 2003 *US invasion of Iraq*, provoking Saddam's demise and the civil war,
- The *ISIS offensive* on Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014.

These events cast new systemic outputs for states to receive and interpret while assessing if they need to change or not their regional grand strategies. In this assessment process, internal factors intervene, altering the policy outcome. The output after each systemic event is a new type of triangulation, with relational patterns and tendencies of its own. Considering the five events up-mentioned, I present four *hypotheses* concerning each type of strategic triangle Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States have shared:

- (H01) from 1969 to 1979, *the Ménage à Trois triangle*: after the British departed from the Persian Gulf, Riyadh, Tehran, and Washington shared positive relations and engaged to guarantee the regional order under the Twin Pillar strategy.

- (H02) from 1979 to 1989, *the Stable Marriage triangle*: after the Iranian Revolution, the US-Saudi securitarian ties intensified as their relations with Iran deteriorated, isolating the new revolutionary country during the Iran-Iraq war.
- (H03) from 1989 to 2003, *the Romantic triangle*: following the Cold War's end and the 1990's Kuwait invasion, Iran and Saudi Arabia improved ties in a rapprochement period, while the United States kept hostile to Iran, hindering the Iran-Saudi détente.
- (H04) from 2003 to 2014, *the rebooted Stable Marriage triangle*: With the US invasion of Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia gained power and halted the détente for disagreeing with the regional order, pushing Riyadh to deepen ties with Washington while rivaling Iran.

These hypotheses guide each of the thesis's four analytical chapters (chapters four, five, six, and seven). In chapter three, I develop an NCR model to support the hypotheses and apply it in chapters four, five, six, and seven. These chapters reveal the study cases, which are the four different periods determined by the systemic events: the first is from *1969 to 1979*, the second from *1979 to 1989*, the third is from *1989 to 2003*, and the fourth from *2003 to 2014*. With these analytical chapters, I aim to answer the following target questions:

- Is the strategic triangle construct efficient for explaining the relations between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States?
- How the regional balance of power plays into the triangle's dynamics and types?
- How much of the regional structure can be explained by this triangular characteristic?
- What are the impacts of each domestic factor (ideational, cognitive, leadership) in defining the countries' grand strategies?
- What are the patterns of each triangular period, how they came to be, and which political tendencies they impose over the three countries' regional behavior?

1.5 Research methodology

This thesis is a deductive study investigating if the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran share a complex relationship in which the three dyads are highly interconnected and interdependent. To confirm the previously presented four hypotheses, I develop an NCR analytical framework in chapter three that has the following explanative chain: *contextualized power* (independent variable) → *status satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives* (intervening variables) → *the strategic triangle* (dependent variable). I aim to show

that the triangulation has a long-standing structure, which is learned and reproduced by ideational understandings and cognitive schemas and has limited the countries' grand strategizing in the region. For that, the explanative chain is applied in each period (1969-1979; 1979-1990; 1990-2003; 2003-2014) in chapters four, five, six, and seven – the case studies.

Each analytical chapter has the same structure. First, it briefly discusses and contextualizes the systemic event that altered the Persian Gulf's balance of power (the 1969 UK departure, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 1990 Gulf War, and the 2003 Iraqi invasion). These events provide conditions for recalculating the explanative chain as the countries assess new constraints and opportunities to orient their action. In other words, they set the analysis into motion. After the contextualization, the analysis moves towards power (the independent variable). I investigate, separately, *stable power* (geography, demography, military, economy) and *changeable power* (alliances, partnerships, regional appeal, diplomatic ties) for the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia throughout the periods. This division reflects NCR's understanding that power is non-fungible and divisible into different elements (Juneau and Schmidt 2012). Moreover, by discussing a period and not only one year but an entire period, I aim to show how power is mutable and shifting.

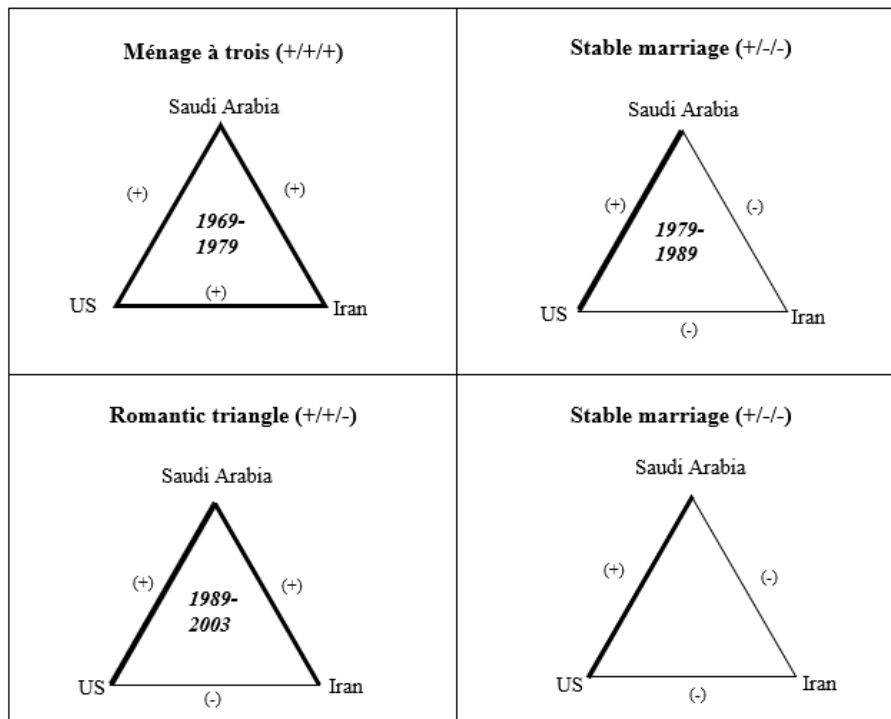
After presenting the independent variable, the subsequent section explores how these three powers are positioned in the Persian Gulf's power balance. In a few paragraphs, I review their general strengths and weaknesses as regional players, framing Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States in the bigger picture of the Persian Gulf system throughout the selected period. That allows for a broader perspective of the system's securitarian environment, including, when necessary, other relevant actors. This section also works as a helpful starting point to link the independent variable and the first intervening variable (status satisfaction).

The next step is the investigation of the intervening variables. First, I explore the *status satisfaction* of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, determining if the country is revisionist or status quo during the period. Status satisfaction concerns if a country's aspired position in the regional order corresponds to the one others ascribe to it. Thus, it can variate positively (status aspiration corresponds to ascription; the actor is satisfied) or negatively (status aspirations do not correspond to ascription; the actor is revisionist). The second intervening variable is *regime identity*, showcasing each country's cognitive roles projected to the region. This variable has a filtering effect, discarding available outcomes that do not correspond to a country's self-

perceived image. The final intervening variable is *foreign policy executives (FPE)*, which explores the preferences of those making foreign policy and grand strategy. For the United States, the focus is on the presidents; for Saudi Arabia, kings and crown princes; for Iran, the Pahlavi dynasty in the first triangle and the supreme leaders and the presidents in the other triangles.

The dependent variable consists of the triangular relationship between the three actors, tracing the main *tendencias* of each period and stressing how they played out within the regional system. I do not discuss all events involving the three countries during the periods but the triangles' tendencies. In each of these sections, the operationalization of the explanative chain must support or not the patterns of strategic triangulation between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States illustrated by the following image.

Image one: the four triangulations



author's elaboration

This thesis has a *qualitative research design*, and I rely on primary and secondary literature about the Middle East, particularly those related to Iran, Saudi Arabia, or the United States, as well as official documents, public statements, and newspapers. The chosen method of assessing the collected data is via exploratory case studies aiming toward theory confirmation via process tracing (George and Bennett 2004; Bennett and Elman 2007). For operationalizing

power (the independent variable), I combine quantitative and qualitative data, presenting various indicators to outline how powerful the three countries are. Considering the *elements of power* I outlined, data varies. For *geography*, I verify the countries' geostrategic relevance and discuss how conflictual or pacific their borders are and how their location conditions their access to resources – oil, gas, or other assets. For *demography*, I discuss the total population, demographic distribution, and rate growth. The content is retrieved from specialized secondary literature and the numbers from the World Bank database for all these indicators.

For measuring each country's *economic* strength, I work with the GDP (total, growth rate, and per capita) and its evolution throughout the selected periods. The numbers are provided in US dollars and are taken from the World Bank database. I also discuss general characteristics of the period based on specialized literature to contextualize these numbers. This way, I present brief historical narratives for periods of economic boom, fiscal crisis, growing inequality, inflation, recession, among others. The final element of stable power is *military* capabilities. I discuss numbers of military personal and defense budgets – in US dollars, in absolute terms, and as a parcel of the GDP. These numbers are taken from the Correlates of War (Singer et al. 1972) and World Bank databases. Moreover, based on expert assessments, I discuss preferences regarding militarization – offense, defense, deterrence – and the quality and innovation of the military equipment, the forces' performance, and the dependency on foreign assistance.

Each chapter's changeable power sections are descriptive and rely on content from specialized literature and official statements. For showcasing the number of *alliances*, *partnerships*, diplomatic ties, and embassies a country has, I employ content from the CoW database and review secondary literature. Moreover, also through secondary literature, I assess a country's *political reputation* in broader terms, discussing events related to prestige and status, such as hosting high-ranking political meetings, frequency of diplomatic visits, participation in summits, and the signature of international deals. Finally, the discussion of *regional appeal* reflects the power of influencing others via sharing links with state and non-state actors. In other words, the regional appeal is a way to explore how much a country's values and political model are rejected, accepted, or emulated by others in the region (Juneau 2015, p. 41).

Finally, I explore the intervening variables primarily via historical narratives, aiming to find explanations within the bigger picture. Data is gathered via an in-deep historical contextualization, examination of specialized literature, and an investigation of primary sources,

especially official statements, pronunciations, and documentation from the periods. I also explore English newspapers, memoirs, interviews, political speeches, and media outlets as primary sources. Declassified documents from the US administration provided by the CIA Website or the online presidential libraries have particular relevance in the analysis. Moreover, leaked diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks, especially between Saudi Arabia and the United States, were used as sources. Finally, official documents available by Iran and Saudi Arabia on their governmental websites were also valuable sources.

Therefore, the research has a *descriptive*, *interpretative*, and *explanative* focus, approaching historical events and official state narratives with critical lenses. Therefore, the collected material is categorized via narrative analyses, which organize the material chronologically and focus on developing a single coherent story. Indeed, NCR's methodological preference is via studies rich in qualitative data that is handled through process tracing (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 132). Process tracing analyses look for detailed case studies to determine whether the hypothesis can be fulfilled and if the predicted causal effects of the chosen intervening variables are visible in the decision-making processes. Deductively, this methodology exposes which intervening events should have occurred within a case if the theory is an accurate explanation (Bennett and Elman 2007). Thus, process tracing generates and analyses data on the causal mechanisms (events, actions, expectations, and other intervening variables), linking putative causes to observed effects. Therefore, this methodology fits neatly with the objectives of this research, as it seeks ways to identify and trace the connections between causes and observed phenomena via sequential processes.

1.5.1 A note on limitations

Here, it is important to recognize my limitations as a researcher to gather data and interpret them. First, considering the high level of attrition and strategic relevance of the relations between these three countries, many important documents are still classified or in the process of declassification. That means some information pieces are yet to become available, which can increment the research by confirming or discarding some of my evidence and conclusions. For that reason, particularly when it comes to the more recent periods, the thesis has to rely on secondary literature and *apud* citations.

Second, I do not have fluency in the regional languages (Arab and Farsi), limiting my knowledge access. Thus, I count on the assistance of third parties' interpretations, native

speakers, and translation tools. Finally, there is a visible discrepancy between the available information from the United States and those from Saudi Arabia and Iran. While I seek to balance the American literature with more regional authors or publications, it is a somewhat impossible task to access an equal level of data from the three countries, considering the Iranian and Saudi Arabian governmental institutions are less accountable or open to public access. Nevertheless, I sought to orient secondary data mostly from MES literature and Iranian and Saudi Arabian authors to balance this problem.

1.6 The study's outline

This thesis has eight chapters, including an introduction, a literature review, a theoretical discussion, four analytical chapters, and a conclusion. Following this introduction, the *second chapter* contextualizes the study's analytical boundaries through a literature review of the International Relations of the Middle East. In the chapter's first part, I discuss the Middle East as a regional system with three subdivisions (the Maghreb, the Persian Gulf, and the Levant), stressing the importance of regions to International Relations. Then, I narrow the focus to the Persian Gulf sub-regional system, pointing to its origins on the eve of the 1970s, characterizing it as multipolar, heavily dependent on oil resources, and marked by transnational religious identities, militarization, and US interventionism. The chapter's final part investigates how the literature has traditionally studied the three relational dyads – US-Iran, US-Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia-Iran. That is necessary to outline which domestic elements the area specialists often depict as mandatory for understanding the three bilateral relations.

The *third chapter* considers the theory and has three parts. The first part justifies the choice for a Neoclassical Realist framework, presenting the added value of combining the MES specialized knowledge with NCR's theoretical prescriptions. In this chapter, I delve into the artificial division of labor between Area Studies and Social Sciences and present Global IR as an attempt to break this circle, motivating dialogue between both fields. I also review the IRME's theoretical inclinations, showing how the field tends to tilt towards a middle ground between universalism and particularism, recurrently defined as analytical eclecticism. Finally, I conclude this part by showing IRME's limitations so far and pointing paths for improvement.

In the theoretical chapter's second part, I discuss the similarities between the NCR approach and IRME's analytical eclecticism, indicating that NCR's added value relates to its research agenda, methodological rigor, and analytical replicability. For that, I look at the NCR

literature, exploring its origins, main objectives, core tenets, and methodological preferences. The third chapter's final part introduces the thesis' chosen analytical framework. I first discuss my selection of variables, which are: contextualized power (independent variable), status satisfaction, regime identity, foreign policy executives (intervening variables), and the strategic triangle (dependent variable). Finally, this chapter introduces the thesis's research design, displaying its explanative analytical chain, methodology, and limitations.

Chapters four, five, six, and seven have the same structure and correspond to the four hypotheses. In each chapter, I first describe the systemic change that ignited a modification in the balance of power. In *chapter four*, this change is the British departure from the Persian Gulf, which provoked the Trucial States' independence and solidified the region as a system within the Middle East. In *chapter five*, the systemic change is the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. *Chapter six* begins by describing the end of the Cold War and the 1990' Gulf War in Kuwait, while *chapter seven* opens with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. After describing these events, I proceed to analyze the countries' power during the selected period. First, power is dissected into changeable power and changeable power. Then, in the sequence, I contextualize the Persian Gulf's balance of power during the period, comparing Iran's, Saudi Arabia's, and the United States' power projection.

After evaluating the systemic change and the countries' power, each chapter explores the three intervening variables for the three countries during the selected periods. The intervening variables resulted from the theoretical operationalization of the domestic elements detected in the second chapter as key to understanding the bilateral relations. The first intervening variable is status quo satisfaction, relating to ideational aspirations – *what are a country's ambitions for the system?* The second is regime identity, referring to cognitive prescriptions – *what self-perceived image a country wants to project?* Finally, the third intervening variable is foreign policy executives, connecting the issue to agency – *how do leaders bend politics and strategies according to their preferences, opinions, and experiences?*

The chapters' final sections present the respective strategic triangle. In these sections, I do not discuss all the countries' interactions exhaustively but the triangle's tendencies during the period. In *chapter four*, the triangle is a 'ménage à trois,' and the tendency is the twin pillar policy, in which the three countries worked together to maintain the status quo. In *chapter five*, the triangle is a 'stable marriage,' and the tendencies are the development of the oil-for-security

partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia and the Iranian political isolation. *Chapter six* explores a ‘romantic triangle,’ in which the tendencies are the Saudi-Iranian détente and the failed attempts from Iran and the United States to approach one another. Finally, *chapter seven* presents a new ‘stable marriage’ triangle, in which the tendencies are the growing Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the US-Iran nuclear negotiations conundrum.

Finally, *chapter eight* presents the thesis’ conclusions. In this chapter, I return to the four triangles, comparing them to pinpoint patterns of similarity and differences while outlining the study’s main contributions. I also briefly discuss the ongoing fifth triangle, which was initiated when the United States and Iran brought troupes to Iraq in 2014 to fight the terrorist group Islamic State (ISIS). This event altered the balance of power once again. Finally, this chapter discusses the thesis’s main theoretical contributions, how the research can be further advanced, its future perspectives, and the strategic triangle’s utility to the intellectual community.

2. Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the Persian Gulf system

This chapter contextualizes the thesis's analytical boundaries by presenting the Middle East region, narrowing the focus to the Persian Gulf as a sub-regional system, and reviewing the literature on the three dyads. First, I stress the importance of studying regions within IR, the Middle East particularities, and how the Persian Gulf emerged as a system. The goal is to provide a historical and critical review that elucidates and localizes the study's objects. Second, I evaluate how the specialized literature has examined the relations between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States via dyads. I delve into the three dyads composing the strategic triangle to explore the different analytical and theoretical preferences that scholars traditionally made. The conclusion pinpoints which elements the literature conventionally stresses as crucial to grasp these relations, which I operationalized as intervening variables in the next chapter.

2.1 The Middle East system

The concept of a regional system is frequently applied in IR studies but seldom conceptualized. While there is an international system in which all the countries take part, it is unreasonable to think that each part of the globe is equally integrated in political or security terms, meaning there is only so much universal generalization one can make that reflects the reality. Regions represent geographically clustered units with a structure of their own while embedded in a larger international system (Buzan and Waever 2003, p. 27). They help us narrow down our focus to a feasible geospatial subject to explore the patterns of intra-state relations, politics, and securitarian concerns happening there. Studying a particular region's international relations entails exploring where parsimonious theories meet the reality on the ground. As Buzan and Waever (2003, p. 43) put it, a region is where the national and the global interplay.

In a nutshell, a region is an area delimited by geographical lines where countries share some economic, political, or securitarian concerns, with or without common ethnicity or ideology. These regions are geopolitical inventions to serve the benefits of those with the most power in a particular territory at a specific moment of its history (Bilgin 2005, p. 12). There is nothing natural in the concept of the Middle East, Latin America, or Europe (Feraboli 2015). These concepts have a multiplicity of meanings, which are fluid and indeterminate, reflecting the interests of those that can lead the conversation. For example, US Admiral Alfred Mahan invented the term the 'Middle East' in 1902 based on his own strategic-military conceptions

(Bilgin 2004, p. 25). Different interests led to the creation of other terms to describe that territory, broadening or narrowing its boundaries – the Arab region, the Muslim Middle East, the Europe-Mediterranean region, the MENA region, and so forth. In short, most often than not, the definition of a region as a distinctive area of operation depends on the observer's point of view in a final instance (Yetiv 2008, p. 20).

Here, a region is defined as a geographical unit, without an actor quality, made up of territorially based states tied together by political, economic, and cultural interactions (Malmvig et al. 2016, p. 33). They do not have an actor quality because they cannot act as a sole unit – the Middle East does not act; Middle Eastern countries do. Moreover, in terms of theoretical architecture, it is advantageous to discuss regional systems as a unit of analysis with its arrangements of interrelationships and distribution of power – an order. That enables the transferences of international system concepts (such as the balance of power, structural arrangements, anarchy, and others) to the regional system without many conceptual modifications (Buzan and Waever 2003, p. 28). This way, regions are hierarchical subsystems to the international system, with their own patterns of conflict and cooperation while dependent on the global distribution of power (Lemke 2002). Thus, they have a system, structure, and polarity, often predisposed to several local factors such as history, culture, and religion.

The Middle East is a regional system (Buzan and Waever 2003; Korany and Dessouki 2008; Gause 2010; Hinnebusch 2014; Yetiv 2018; Fawcett 2020). In this thesis, I work with Buzan and Waever's (2003, p. 44) definition of a regional system as composed of a set of states whose 'securitization and desecuritization processes are so interlinked that their security cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.' Regional systems are marked by durable amity and enmity patterns, a shared history, and, possibly but not necessarily, common cultural, ethnic, or identitarian traits. A regional system's formalization depends on its security interaction's durability, whether negative or positive. The Middle East regional system was politically invented during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to external actors' securitarian interests, mainly Great Britain, France, and Russia (Bilgin 2005, p. 10). It has been the stage for great power competition for centuries due to its strategic location, crucial trading routes, religious importance, and oil resources (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 13).

Therefore, the Middle East we see today is a product of the local actors' interaction with great powers during the European imperialist era during World War II and the Cold War.¹ These interactions created a profoundly dependent system that reflects the core-periphery unequal division of global politics (Ismael 1986; Brown 1999; Hinnebusch 2014). The region offers a story about how both old and new states emerged into a competitive international system that was simultaneously hostile to and enabling their power (Fawcett 2020). Ismael (1986) calls it a subordinated system because regional interactions profoundly depend on the global structure. European imperialism fragmented the region into many artificial states, which were often at odds with each other and sought external patrons to guarantee their security (Hinnebusch 2014). The Cold War superpowers continued to interfere in many of the region's politics, security, and economics. The US's interventionism only increased after the end of the bipolarity, being the two wars against Iraq (1990 and 2003) a case in point. Moreover, the second decade of the 2000s has shown an incipient reemergence of great power competition, as China and Russia aim for a more significant role in the Middle East (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018).

Because they emerged in a context of high economic and securitarian dependence on the external powers, many local states failed to install robust institutions (Buzan and Waever 2003, p. 178; Hinnebusch 2014, p. 7). These states' monopoly of force and control of the national territory has often been contested, leading to a process of militarization within the regimes to guarantee regime survival (David 1991). In its turn, militarization eventually undermined most of the state's capacity to provide welfare to citizens, aggravating internal opposition and threats to the regimes (Bilgin 2005, p. 195). Many states have been unsuccessful in delivering modernization of administrative structures or providing public health, education, social justice, and economic development (Anderson 1987; Yossef and Cerami 2015). Notwithstanding their efficiency, the state system proved itself resilient in the region. By the 1980s, all local elites managed to adapt the European state model to their countries, with the principles of sovereignty and self-determination becoming dominant (Ismael 1986; Fawcett 2020).

Moreover, as these states were often arbitrarily imposed by external actors at the expense of preexisting identities, one cannot assume high congruence between nationality and state (Hinnebusch 2014, pp. 9–10; Mabon 2016, p. 107). Ideational and ideological transnational

¹ Here, it is crucial to pinpoint that I am not saying that there were no other securitarian relational patterns in this territory before its European domination. The point is that the *Middle East regional system*, as seen and understood today, started due to foreign intervention.

movements and discourses strongly mark the Middle East regional system. Irredentist political movements such as Arab nationalism and Islamism deeply inform regional politics and transnational identities like Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia, among others. These pre-colonial elements can be transmitted from one country to another, meaning that a national interest consensus cannot be taken as a given (Hinnebusch 2014, p. 10). Nevertheless, identities, symbols and social practices grew alongside the state system, working as empowering tools or threatening features for states in their geopolitical calculations (Gause 2010, pp. 8–11). Therefore, these elements should be analyzed together with the material structure and not as something making the Middle East utterly distinct from other regions (Halliday 2009, p. 23; Yossef and Cerami 2015, p. 5).

Finally, the system had been unsuccessful in developing a regional power in the sense of an actor whose power capabilities significantly outweigh others (Beck 2014, p. 4). In other words, the Middle East is a prime example of multipolarity. Several relatively powerful countries (Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia) possess some resources to proclaim regional leadership and influence actors, but not enough to alter the power balance. Many have tried to project a regional leadership image throughout history, but they eventually failed to acquire the needed material and ideological resources to influence geopolitics, obtain local legitimacy and enforce institutional command (Fawcett 2016a, p. 199; Malmvig et al. 2016). Moreover, the states have frequently interfered in each other's political affairs (Halliday 2005, p. 39), contributing to maintaining a zero-sum multipolarity, where the environment is more competitive than collaborative (Beck 2014; Fawcett 2016a).

These characteristics (external interference, fragile states, transnational identities, and zero-sum multipolarity) made the Middle East a conflictual system, less prone to regionalism. The IRME's traditional research agenda involves territorial disputes, long-lasting conflicts, ideological battles, resource competition, power and status rivalry, and ethnic and religious divisions. However, far from being the consequence of cultural peculiarities like Huntington's Clash of Civilization predicted, these characteristics double back to exogenous impositions linked to global power's core-peripheric division. The legacy of colonialism and foreign interference, together with overlapping transnational identities and the absence of clear hierarchies between local countries, shape the regional system until today.

A regional system can have well-defined subcomplexes that also act as systems. These subregions represent distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are caught up in broader defining patterns (Buzan and Waever 2003, pp. 51–52). The Middle East has three subregions: the Levant, the Maghreb, and the Persian Gulf. All actors belonging to the Middle East share the experience of belonging to a region with the four characteristics previously described. However, according to which subregion they belong, they can also share other securitarian priorities particular to them (Buzan and Waever 2003, p. 191). These subdivisions assist in producing a deeper understanding of interstate dynamics and patterns of relations. Hence, the following section narrows down my research object, centering the analysis on the Persian Gulf system.

2.2 The Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is a body of water in Western Asia, an extension of the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea. The Strait of Hormuz stands on its southeast part, and the Shatt al-Arab river delta is on its northwest shoreline, connecting to the Euphrates River. The system consists of eight countries: Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.² Physical barriers set it apart from the rest of the Middle East: mountains to the north and east, marshes at its head, and deserts to the south (Potter 2009, p. 1). This section has two parts: first, I make a historical contextualization to show how the system formed, and second, I describe its main characteristics, which are religion, oil, militarization, and the US presence.

² While some authors restrain themselves these geographical limitations of the subsystem (Gause 2010; Fürtig 2002), others argue that Yemen is also a regional system member due to its securitarian interlinks (Ulrichsen 2015). As discussed in the previous section, a regional system's boundaries are not rigid and depend much on the observer's objectives. For that matter, I consider Yemen here in the periphery of the Persian Gulf system, a point of connection with the Horn of Africa subsystem.

Image two: the Persian Gulf



Source: Google (n.d.)

2.2.1 The formation of the regional system

The Persian Gulf's historical relevance reflects its strategic location. In ancient times, it was a crucial route for empires such as the Achaemenid, the Islamic, and the Ottoman (Abedin 2019, p. 155). It was vital for trading roads connecting the Middle East to India, East Africa, and Asia (Potter 2009, p. 1). During the European maritime expansion towards India, it became exceptionally attractive, with the first Portuguese expedition to Hormuz dating 1507 and the Dutch and the British following suit (Ulrichsen 2015, p. 15). For centuries, the port cities were a space for constant interchange of people, creating cosmopolitan, mercantile societies. The maritime flows formed acculturation processes that flourished into a hybrid Arab-Persian culture, mixing ethnicities, languages, and creeds (Ulrichsen 2015, p. 16; Potter 2009, p. 7).

By the end of the nineteenth century, increasing great power competition led the British to control the Persian Gulf to protect their Indian frontier. They aimed to control piracy, take hold of commercial routes, build political ties with local sheiks, and establish an imperial defense. Its formal influence was imposed after the 1980s treaties of protection signed with Bahrain and the Trucial States rulers. They enacted a system of indirect rule in protectorates that

sheiks guaranteed a certain local governance level (Potter 2009, p. 14). In 1907, the first large petroleum field was discovered in Iran (then Persia), and the Anglo-Persian Company became a key fuel supplier to the UK military. In general, Western private oil companies did most of the extraction, having exclusive rights and control of the industry (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 15). For example, in 1933, Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL) secured the right to exclusively explore Saudi Arabian Eastern oil province. By the 1940s, the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) extracted oil in massive commercial quantities.

Between World War I and II, Iran and Iraq modernized and centralized their governments, while tribes in the Arab Peninsula founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In tandem, the United Kingdom and Russia increased their influence in these countries to check German expansion. During World War II, allied forces occupied most of the Persian Gulf to secure the oilfields for military demand. Yetiv and Oskarsson (2018, p. 17) conjecture that the conflict could have had a very different outcome if the Nazis had successfully controlled the area instead. Since then, the region only grew in geopolitical importance, compelling the United States to become more involved to guarantee the oil flow to the West during the Cold War. The European and Japanese reconstruction after 1945 depended on oil at affordable prices. Hence, the US's success in the bipolarity was somewhat contingent on maintaining the Persian Gulf under Western influence.

Initially, the United Kingdom served the United States as a surrogate power that guaranteed the order via its ties with local sheiks and the three ruling monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, they agreed on the Persian Gulf's strategic value and worked to keep it stable to avoid Soviet influence. Washington's involvement in local politics was indirect via its oil companies, particularly ARAMCO, in Saudi Arabia (Vitalis 2007; Fain 2008). Political involvement was minimal and mainly in combination with the British. For example, they pressured the Soviets out of Iran after 1945 and provided aid packages, military training assistance, and armaments (Musavian 2014, p. 22). In 1953, London and Washington assisted Iran's Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979) in the coup d'état that overthrew the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh after he attempted to nationalize the oil. However, in 1968, the Western strategy suffered its first major strike after a military coup in Iraq toppled the pro-British monarchy and brought the Arab Socialist Baath Party to power, tilting Iraq closer to the Soviets.

A second strike came in 1969 when the British Labor party announced its intention to conclude the protectorate in the Persian Gulf (Fain 2008; Peterson 2009). However, a combination of economic distress, unpopular colonial policies, and the 1956 Suez crisis in Egypt drove the British to announce their departure from the Middle East. By 1971, the United Arab Emirates and South Yemen (a Marxist republic) were founded, and Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar became independent: the British transition was complete (Gause 2010, p. 24). In 1972, Iraq signed a fifteen-year treaty with the Soviets, while Saudi Arabia and Iran reaffirmed their commitment to the Western powers by boosting their ties with the United States (Saikal 2019, p. 35).

Therefore, the eve of the 1970s marked the beginning of the Persian Gulf system, composed of independent actors that shared securitarian concerns (Buzan and Waever 2003; Peterson 2009; Gause 2010). The local interrelations were enough for it to become a distinct system that is deeply penetrated by external powers, embedded in the international power balance, and interdependent with the capitalist economy. This Middle Eastern subregion corresponds to the convergence of the Western economic and energy security concerns with local governments' security anxieties (Bilgin 2005, p. 201). The following section describes the system's main characteristics: religion, oil, militarization, and the US's presence.

2.2.2 The Persian Gulf regional system

The Persian Gulf's structure is multipolar, in the sense that no regional country managed to accumulate capabilities to become a hegemon (Aarts and van Duijne 2009; Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018). However, it always presented regional challengers or candidates, meaning countries that can reach this position and become significant powers that shape the order under the right conditions (Cline et al. 2011, p. 150). The two most suitable candidates until 2003 were Iran and Iraq due to their size, population, and military resources. Both countries had, throughout history, projected their supremacy ambitions, frequently linking them to transnational ideologies such as Arabism or Islamism. Saudi Arabia is also listed as a regional power candidate due to its massive oil reserves, religious importance, and unique ties with the United States. While Saudi Arabia has not projected a traditionally hegemon's ambition, its behavior since 2011 suggests it also sees itself as an available candidate (Al-Rasheed 2018a; Hiro 2018).

Some authors talk about a Persian Gulf tripolarity in the sense that there is a competition between Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia shaping the balance of power (Fürtig 2002; Aarts and van

Duijne 2009; Gause 2010). I argue that this tripolar interpretation is unsatisfactory for two main reasons. First, from 1971 until 2003, it is impossible to assume that Saudi Arabia was competing with Iran and Iraq for regional leadership. Riyadh was acutely aware of its limitations due to size, population, and military capacities, coordinating policies to continue the multipolarity while guaranteeing closer ties to the less threatening country. Second, this framework overlooks that, since the 1980s, the United States has been a participative actor in the region's security-making processes. It gradually became an extra-regional power, with military capacities overpassing local actors. Therefore, any work aiming to understand the Persian Gulf's order must include the United States as a partaking actor rather than an element affecting outcomes passively.

One of the first characteristics that literature stresses are religion's importance to the Persian Gulf's politics (Nasr 2007; Mabon 2016). Decades of cultural interchange meant that the local population coexisted among many different sects (Potter 2009, p. 2). Shias concentrated in Iraq, Iran, and Bahrain during the nineteenth century, while Sunnis were the majority within the peninsula. Concomitantly, the Al Saud dynasty in Saudi Arabia grounds its rule legitimacy via an alliance with the Wahhabi sect, monopolizing religion and worship (Mabon 2016, p. 112). From 1932 to 1979, Saudi Arabia was the sole state ruled only by the Sharia, giving the country a sense of exceptionalism towards the *ummah*, the global community of Muslims. This way, the Saud dynasty believed it had the international function of protecting and promoting Islam worldwide (Al-Rasheed 2010; Darwich 2014).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 added a second theocracy to the Persian Gulf. The revolutionary ayatollahs promoted their political awakening as an Islamist model to free Muslims from oppression everywhere (Abrahamian 2008; Saikal 2019). This way, Iranian politics also saw their foreign behavior linked with the sponsorship of Islamist ideals. This event also put Saudi Arabia and Iran on opposing sides of ideological divides: the first a Sunni, conservative monarchy, the latter a Shia, revolutionary republic. The fact that two of its larger countries have their international politics linked with a religious-ideological function has marked the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the legitimacy of the other monarchies in Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain also depends on their ties with local *ulama* (Muslim clerics) and the protection of sacred sites. Finally, since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, sectarian disputes have increasingly permeated Iraq politics (Ghattas 2020).

Some authors focus on the Shia vs. Sunni divide narrative to explain the Persian Gulf's geopolitics (Nasr 2007; Soltaninejad 2019; Abedin 2019). However, while there are doctrinal differences between both sects, they do not, by definition, instigate a divide (Al-Rasheed 2011). Concerning international relations, religious identities are most important because they work as tools for leaders to expand their influence or weaken a competitor (Gause 2010, p. 11). Moreover, religious affiliations (such as –Shia, Sunni, or other minorities such as Zayed, Zoroaster, Jew, or Bahai) do not prevent someone from having a sense of belonging to a country or loyalty to a state. Thus, while transnational identities mark the Persian Gulf system, that does not make the region unique nor define its politics alone. In this sense, religion matters because it legitimizes many regimes' rule and works as an instrument for the states to gather power and influence.

The second characteristic that defines the Persian Gulf is its massive oil reserves. Together, the region amount to more than 47% of the total proven oil reserves globally and 37.5% of the world's total proven natural gas reserves (BP 2020). Saudi Arabia alone holds 11,8% of the total exports, with its biggest markets being China, India, Japan, and Europe (BP 2020). The Persian Gulf countries are vital for the global economy because they can critically shift production, consumption, and pricing through their status at the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), founded in 1960 (Bojarczyk 2012; Bahgat 2017). Notably, local leaders assumed (quite pacifically) the total control of the oil production by the early 1970s, revoking the remaining concessions first given to Western companies (Vitalis 2007; Pollack 2002). After the 1973 oil embargo, OPEC transformed the global energy market entirely by showcasing its power to interrupt the supplies and alter prices, increasing the Persian Gulf countries' political leverage.

Undoubtedly, oil was essential to consolidate local regimes (Crystal 1989; Moritz 2018; Krane 2019). The incomes enable rulers to lift their subjects out of poverty, providing subsidies on energy, cheap water, and almost no taxes in some monarchies (Krane 2019, pp. 2–4). Citizens enjoyed a large welfare state where the government supplied jobs, housing, development, and essential goods at the oil wealth costs. Thus, these regimes bargained with their citizens to guarantee the continuity of the social contract via rent distribution, ruling under delicate social-economic stability with few political oppositions (Crystal 1989). These rentier economies are highly dependable on oil price fluctuation and are marked by deep structural imbalances that

hamper production diversification (Moritz 2018; Krane 2019). Growing population, rising consumption, and declining production underscore their vulnerability and can create serious security problems in the long run (Ulrichsen 2015; Bahgat 2017).

Oil connects directly with the Persian Gulf's third characteristic, which is a high level of militarization due to territorially bounded challenges, such as transnational Islamism, nuclear proliferation, and resource competition (Ulrichsen 2015, p. 5; Gause 2010, pp. 8–10). Since 1945, there have been three regional wars (the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988, the Gulf War after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, and the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003), two revolutions (the Iraqi in 1968 and the Iranian in 1979) and several social unrests (such as the Siege of the Grand Mosque in 1979, the Iranian Green Movement in 2009, and the Bahraini Arab Uprising in 2011). The link between oil and militarization is twofold. First, oil draws external actors in the region and creates disputes, exacerbating conflicts. Second, oil wealth enables local countries to push further the security dilemma by continually building up their military.

Since its formation, the system has shown significant numbers of defense expenditures. During the 1970s, Iran invested extraordinarily in its military, buying expensive, state-of-the-art weaponry from the West (Ward 2009). In the 1980s, with Western powers and the Soviet Union's assistance, Iraq boosted its army and navy, becoming the strongest military in the region. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia gradually boosted its defense spending while consolidating strong security relations with the United States (Pollack 2002). In the 2000s, Riyadh accelerated its militarization process to unprecedented levels, reaching, in 2014, the status of the third-biggest defense budget in the world. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates followed through, especially after the 2011 Arab Uprisings. In the last decade, the monarchies have been massively investing in defense and offense capabilities to safeguard themselves from other regional actors and possible domestic turmoil (Bojarczyk 2012; Gaub 2015).

The final fourth characteristic that defines the Persian Gulf system is the US's presence. Several factors, such as political stability and energy security, have placed the region prominently within Washington's security calculations, which will not change in any predictable mid-term scenario (Juneau 2014; Mabon 2018; Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018). Washington's political involvement in the region developed gradually and somewhat reluctantly, first giving preference to surrogate actors (the United Kingdom and later Iran) to

ensure stable oil prices and check Soviet influence. The loss of its leading regional partner with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the war between the two most powerful local actors in the 1980s drove the United States to build a more coherent, long-term strategy. The 1980's Carter Doctrine remains the tenant for the US's regional interests until today: guarantee the stability of the oil market, protect traditional partners, sustain a US-leaning order, and avoid the emergence of a local hegemon (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Yetiv 2008).

In this thesis, I follow other actors that describe Washington as an extra-regional power within the Persian Gulf (Layne 2006; Juneau 2014; Hook 2015; Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018). In a nutshell, an extra-regional power holds diplomatic relations, armed presence, military-military relations, economic ties, and security interdependence with local actors that shape its policies there (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 8). Indeed, the United States holds the most advanced military capabilities deployable in the Persian Gulf and shares strategic relations with most countries but Iran (Beck 2014, p. 8). In this sense, while not belonging to the region geographically, it is an extra-regional actor that plays a crucial role in establishing the regional order and its maintenance. It is far from a neutral actor fostering stability but rather a partisan player in the geopolitical game (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 8; Buzan 2009, p. 45). Therefore, its role should be studied as part of the systemic interplay, not an element only affecting it.

I argue that the regional system has a *fifth characteristic: a triangular relationship between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States*. I am not stating that the region is tripolar, but the dynamic interaction between these three actors since its formation shapes the order. After Saddam Hussein's fall and Iraq's immersion in civil conflict, many authors describe the regional order as a Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia, manipulating local sectarian schisms (Gause 2014; Mabon 2018; Hiro 2018). This Cold War frame considers the US's role as a factor influencing a long-standing rivalry between two mirrored-opposed powerful countries. However, I maintain that this frame is not the most efficient, reflecting only a moment, not the structure. The following pages provide a literature review of the three relational dyads (US-Iran, US-Saudi Arabia, and Iran-Saudi Arabia) to sustain this argument, stressing how these actors have been fundamental to the Persian Gulf's international politics.

2.3 The study of the dyads

This section calls attention to the diverse set of tools used to understand these three complex relations. This review is necessary for two reasons. First, to confirm the gap in the

literature discussed in the introduction, meaning the absence of theoretically informed IR studies including the three countries. Second, to inform the theoretical outline in the next chapter. Neoclassical Realism sustains that the definition of intervening variables can only be satisfied through an in-depth assessment of the study case. In other words, the employment of intervening variables must reflect the specificities of the study's object to improve explanatory value. Hence, the following review aims to shed light on elements that the specialized literature has repeatedly stressed as crucial to understanding the relations. This chapter concludes by pinpointing and categorizing these elements.

2.3.1 The United States and Iran

The literature has defined the relationship between Iran and the United States as 'clearly dysfunctional' (Cook and Rawshandil 2009, p. 158), 'contentious and hostile' (St.Marie and Naghshpour 2011, p. 183), 'dogmatic' (Musavian 2014: 7) and even 'mythological' (Beeman 2005). Despite the absence of diplomatic ties since the hostage crisis in 1980 – when Iranian students invaded the US Embassy in Tehran during the revolution – both countries retained a 'very real presence in each other's political life' (Ansari 2006, p. 158). From close partners in the 1960s and 1970s to enemies since the 1980s, they have taken each other 'permanently into account when developing their foreign policy to the region' (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, p. 162). In modern history, few interstate relations have as much emotion, strategic rivalry, and ideological disputes as the US-Iranian one (Abedin 2019).

Relations between both countries began around the late XIX Century, but diplomatic ties only officialized in 1944. From then on, the US's involvement in Iranian politics grew continuously with the Pahlavi dynasty's green light, transforming the ties into a solid economic, political, and securitarian partnership. The United States assisted Shah Reza Pahlavi to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 and established a progressively authoritarian one-man rule (Ansari 1998). Until 1979, Iran consolidated itself as the US' leading partner in the region (Petersen 2011). However, Washington's deep association with the Pahlavi regime made it impossible to keep an amicable tone with the ayatollahs after 1979. The revolutionaries framed the ties with the United States as one of the primary products of oppression and wrongdoings the monarchy inflicted on Iranians. Thus, the abrupt change from partners to enemies has been a topic of many investigations. Explanations address cultural and ideological

dimensions, misinterpretations and miscommunications patterns, ideological and identitarian definitions, and political scheme crafting.

First, it is important to stress that many writings about the Iranian-American ties have been ‘non-academic, written from an American perspective, or focused on a single international issue’ (Kinch 2016, p. 10). In this sense, literary production in the English language often reflects a hierarchical division of power within knowledge production. There is an imbalance between American and Iranian outlooks, with many scholars reproducing the US’s political interests in framing Iran as an ‘irrational actor’ and ‘enemy’ of international order or a ‘pariah state.’ That does not mean the same does not happen in the literature produced by Iranian authorship. Due to the high level of tension and friction between both countries, this literature is more often than not politicized. Thus, the ability to detect biased opinions and framing devices is an art to be mastered by anyone studying the US-Iran relations.

Second, many authors provide a detailed contextualized description of the US-Iranian ties throughout history to inform and contribute to foreign policy decision-making. Some provide thorough reports tracking the sources of disagreements, presenting a more nuanced explanation rather than repeating misconceptions and prejudices (Bill 1998; Pollack 2005; Cook and Rawshandil 2009; Seliktar 2012; Musavian 2014). Nonetheless, these works are primarily linked to diplomats or policy advisors from the American or Iranian government offices. They are not necessarily interested in explaining the relations through any theoretical lenses but in revealing patterns of behaviors, repetitive mistakes, and mistrust that can inform future policymaking.

For example, Pollack (2002) argues that policymakers must understand that the US’s administrations made many contradictory choices that contributed to developing in Iran an ‘obsession with foreign interference.’ He calls attention to the effects that leadership in each country has on shaping and reshaping perceptions of the other, addressing the policymakers’ persistent inability to reduce hostilities. Similarly, Seliktar (2012) explores each US administration’s choices and strategies to explain the several cases of miscommunication between Iran and the United States. In her view, a path-dependent experience of mistrust permeates the US’s decision-making elite, hampering the process of assessing any incoming Iranian signals. Cook and Rawshandil (2009) also focus on this issue of receiving signals,

claiming that both countries had shown willingness to improve relations many times. However, whenever one actor sent a signal, the other side tended to dismiss it or not respond in time.

Many authors stress the inability of both countries to understand each other. Musavian (2014) claims that many missed opportunities and failed attempts of rapprochement resulted from the US' obliviousness about the Iranian 'culture of resistance.' Americans struggle to see Iran beyond the image of a revolution's exporter, anti-American, and untrusty actor. Conversely, the idea that the US's language is threatening and intimidating influences Iranians profoundly. The focus on these constructions of enmities via framing devices of mistrust is frequent in the literature. Kinch (2016, p. 41) stresses that Iranians' experience with intervention explains their intrinsic suspicion of dialogue with the United States. According to Musavian (2014), this suspicion became a dogma, where exaggerated narratives of the other are used to justify their own behavior, perpetuating hostility.

To Beeman (2005), a lack of cultural understanding and a prolonged pattern of non-communication led the two to construct mythological images that demonize one another. Miscommunication reinforced these exaggerated negative views of each other, and by repeating them often enough, they became social norms. Adib-Moghaddam (2012, p. 153) affirms that the relations are conflict-ridden not due to an inherent antagonism but because they operate in a discursive field permeated by memories of violence and perpetrated by social agents profiting from the antagonism. In this sense, he stressed the links between discourse, elites, framed myths, and cultural realities as determinants of the relationship's patterns. These patterns are so ingrained in the US-Iranian ties that even leaders interested in settlement struggle to break free.

Lack of empathy between parts drove the creation of depreciative schemes and exaggerated stereotypes, prompting actors to anticipate deception (Blight et al. 2012). As a result, my policymakers see themselves in a moral struggle between the 'Mad Mullahs' and 'Great Satan' (Beeman 2005). To explain that, some authors focus on tracking down the 'original sin' that justifies their incapability to change the hostility (Blight et al. 2012; Beeman 2005; Musavian 2014; Kinch 2016). To Americans, Iran is beyond understanding because of the hostage crisis, their liaison with supposedly terrorist groups, and their poor human rights status. Conversely, Iranians condemn the US's participation in the 1953 coup against Mossadegh, the alliance with the Shah, and its support to Iraq against Iran in the 1980s war. Adib-Moghaddam (2012, p. 152) maintains that it is essential to focus on the language each

country addresses the other. To him, Iranian and American political elites do not necessarily react to the immediate reality but to their representations of reality. In this sense, even when they try to reach out to each other, they tend to do without changing the hostile language, giving continuity to the idea that their relations are inherently antagonistic.

Beeman (2005, p. 19) calls the US-Iran relations a ‘true postmodern culture conflict,’ as it centers not on a substantive conflict but on symbolic discourses constructed to fit the otherness as an idealized enemy. While this approach ignores the material threats one country represents to the other, it provides a valuable interpretation of how ideas, narratives, and identities matter. There is a growing effort to dissect the complex discursive field in which the relationship developed and how invented narratives work to set the countries apart and justify their behavior. Kinch (2016) transfers Beeman’s anthropological model to IR, employing Constructivism to grasp the political constructions that transformed the hostility into the norm. In her approach, Iranian and American political identities hold a ‘unique place in the political identity of the other, reproduced and compounded by the influence of history and experience on collective memory’ (Kinch 2016, p. 8).

Kinch’s constructive lens enables a study of how US’s and Iran’s policies rely on intangible factors such as norms, narratives, and ideology. She stresses that they perceive themselves as an internationalist missionary quality that collides often. Therefore, this idea indicates that Iran and the United States interact with the international system in a way that reflects ideational ambitions. They have an expectation about how the system should be, and they intend to lead this change for their benefit. However, Constructivism tends to obscure the hierarchy between causing factors, ignoring the weight of systemic pressures. While purely materialistic approaches are incomplete for ignoring these non-tangible elements, abandoning altogether issues of anarchy and power does not fix the problem. As Bill (2001) insists, much of the game Iran and the United States play if stripped from all the patterns of hostility and animosity, is still dependent on the balance of power.

A trend within the US-Iran literature is to focus on the role of leadership in a particular moment. For example, Ganji (2006), Ansari (2006), Ehteshami and Zweiri (2008), El-Khawas (2011), Alvandi (2012), and Seliktar (2012) emphasize the person in charge in each American or Iranian administration and his preferred policies to explain foreign policy. These authors emphasize how much foreign relations can alter from one president to another, implying that

policymaking can shift outcomes in one direction or another despite the importance of a country's ideational ambitions and identities. They employ discourse analysis, psychological profiling, and thick descriptions of diplomatic meetings, official documents, speeches, and memoirs to stress the leader's prominence. Much detailed information is gathered and analyzed to uncover how leadership is imperative in decision-making in both countries. Nevertheless, these approaches do not offer replicable analytical models or comparative typologies because they focus on the individual level.

Finally, scholarly production tends to reflect political trends. Since the 2000s, there have been increasingly more studies concerning nuclear power, following the growing international concern over the Iranian nuclear capacitation and its plans to enrich uranium. Authors like Cordesman (2009) and Jones (2011) investigate the US sanctions' effect on Iran's economy and international relations. In a refreshing contribution, Jones (2011) examines the Iranian and American discursive practices in government and press, reflecting on the media's function to normalize images states make of one another. El-Khawas (2011) and Colleau (2016) focus on how the presidencies of Obama's and Rouhani's languages changed the traditional discourse, influencing the outcome of the nuclear negotiations in 2013. Similarly, Borszik (2014) and Prosser (2017) center their analyses on the sanctions and the expectations of reinserting Iran into the international community. In his turn, Parsi (2017) offers an extensive account of the diplomatic negotiations, providing a compelling claim that leadership's role is crucial to instigating change in both countries' perceptions.

In short, the US-Iran dyad's literature is permeated by studies about rivalry, emotion, vilified images, antagonism, identities, and miscommunication. Authors have investigated this complex relation through lenses that include cognitive and ideational factors. They stress how a series of hostile interactions after 1979 created images of inherent antagonism that are tricky to transform or abandon. As Adib-Moghaddam (2012) shows, these images are ingrained in each country's political memory and constantly reproduced by their leaders, reinforcing mistrust among the political elite and the public. Thus, the literature underscores that frameworks including political narratives and identities are essential to understanding this dyad. Kinch (2016) highlights that this ingrained hostility is linked with both countries' missionary ambitions and exceptionalist ideologies, hindering their ability to coexist. Thus, she stresses ideational elements related to ambition, guidance, dualism, and dogmas.

Other authors have concentrated on extensive reviews of particular events between the two countries to offer a way forward to improve relations (Pollack 2005; Cook and Rawshandil 2009; Musavian 2014; Parsi 2017). These authors stressed how leaders had primarily been unable to reach each other, trapped in a pattern of non-communication and expectations of deception. Finally, some authors stress the significance of Iran to the geopolitics of the Middle East and how fruitful it can be for Washington to have a better relationship with it (Pollack 2005; Bahgat and Sharp 2014). However, that would demand both actors to deconstruct their vilified images and understand what the other is. In conclusion, the literature insists on the need to investigate non-material and domestic factors that define this long-term animosity (Bill 1998; Beeman 2005; Adib-Moghaddam 2012; Blight et al. 2012; Kinch 2016). Therefore, cognitive factors and leaders' skills seem to be mandatory elements for analyzing the US-Iranian relationship.

2.3.2 The United States and Saudi Arabia

The United States and Saudi Arabia share an enduring bond that has been called a 'special alliance' (Vitalis 2007), 'fundamentally paradoxical' (Riedel 2018), a 'strategic partnership' (Cordesman 2016), and even an 'oxymoron' (Grey 2017). These euphemisms describe the pragmatic relations between two countries that do not share cultural values but vital security objectives. According to Partrick (2016, p. 359), the relationship 'has never been a love affair,' but a realistic collaboration based on mutual interests. Long (2004, p. 25) stresses that both countries 'never enjoyed a deep mutual understanding of, or had sensitive towards, the other's culture.' In its majority, the literature provides a detailed description of the diplomatic history between both countries and reflections on the possible effects of particular events on this crucial yet contradictory relationship.

Considering that the US-Saudi ties started due to oil exploration, it is predictable that a chunk of the literature focuses on Aramco, the oil market dynamics, and the government-companies interactions. Brown (1999) evaluates the private and public sectors' exchanges and oil politics, surveying the Saudi-American oil diplomacy's historiography and scrutinizing Aramco's or OPEC's impact on the economic market. Hart (1998) and Long (1985) take advantage of their position as US officials to offer inside information, detailed pictures of personalities, and rich diplomatic history narratives. However, some of these works frequently

suffered from a lack of critical analysis despite providing compelling memoirs and thorough explanations of events.

Differently, Vitalis (2007) ventures to explain the US's role in Saudi Arabia's oil politics through critical and postcolonial lenses. He demystifies Aramco's image as an exception among exploitative foreign enterprises and stresses how the United States acted as a reproducer of exclusionary practices that impacted Saudi-American ties and Saudi development.³ Also critical, Citino (2002) explores the process that led the United States to take over the British role in the Persian Gulf without altering the imperialistic power structures in oil-producing countries. Both authors rightfully criticize the literature that neglects the US's neo-imperialistic behavior in labor production and reproduction in the Saudi oil sector. They stress that much of the relationship is a product of the US's hegemonical interests, which shaped 'unique circumstances of Saudi state-building, enabling the ruling family to postpone crucial decisions about the division of power and wealth in the kingdom' (Citino 2002, p. 181).

Most analysts use a widespread expression when describing the US-Saudi relations: 'oil for security bargain.' Riyadh guarantees a stable oil supply to the capitalist societies, and Washington retributes by guaranteeing security, military procurements, and protection (Pollack 2002; Long 2004; Partrick 2016; Riedel 2018). This liaison is traced back to 1945 when, for the first time, a Saudi king met a US president on the USS Quincy naval cruise. Ibn Saud sought a security partner in the United States in that meeting, while Roosevelt expected Saudi oil to reconstruct the European economy (Riedel 2018, p. 4). Long (2004) and Gause (2010) detail that the oil was central to the relationship less due to American consumption than reconstructing the Western economies. Therefore, oil exportation and regional security became strongly interconnected, frequently cited as the cornerstone of the partnership.

The oil-for-security idea drives authors to apply a Realist lens to the relations (Mason 2014; Gause 6/13/2016). Mason (2014) argues that there are significant geostrategic stimuli for the United States to keep a working, positive relationship with the Saudis. The two countries are bound to cooperate to maintain the status quo, keep the oil exports, enforce nuclear non-proliferation norms, and cooperate in contra-terrorism missions. Partrick (2016) agrees that

³ In his view, the American role is surrounded by an exceptionalism mystique, in which its history is unlike any other, and its foreign enterprises are anything but imperialistic, like the Europeans (Vitalis 2007). Americans see themselves as an 'empire antithesis,' and this distorted imaged resulted in fabricated myths about Aramco being a positive force on Saudi society. Rather, Vitalis argued that the company deliberately took advantage of Jim Crow's norms of segregation, reproducing a set of exclusionary practices to impose them in Saudi Arabia.

Washington and Riyadh conflate interests regarding the regional order: the first aims to keep its position as an extra-regional power, and the second wants to halt the emergence of any local hegemon. Other authors argue that Saudi Arabia prioritizes ties with the United States accordingly to its perception of the regional balance of threats. While maintaining a structural worldview, Gause (2011) and Partrick (2016) open the state's black box to highlight Saudi Arabian security paranoia. However, they do not provide an equal analysis of the US's domestic pathologies, focusing only on the monarchy's foreign policy. There is a tendency within the literature to assume the United States as the rational actor in the Middle East, discarding the need to investigate how their perceptions and anxieties affect politics.

Grey (2017) examines the complex interdependence between the United States as a preponderant traditional power and Saudi Arabia as a preponderant power in the energy market. Using hegemonic stability theory to expand the oil-for-security bargain approach, he reviews Saudi Arabia's possibilities to use oil as a weapon to act independently from the hegemon. Despite its growing independence from Saudi Arabia's oil, Washington needs to commit to regional stability, thus being compelled not to jeopardize its relationship with Riyadh. Grey (2017) concludes that Riyadh became a 'bothersome thorn in America's flesh,' crucial to maintaining the oil market from being disrupted. Under this interpretation, while Saudi Arabia relies on the United States for stability and militarization, the United States is also dependent on Saudi Arabia to keep oil prices low and influence other Muslim countries.

Other authors alter, expand, and complement the oil-for-security bargain approach. Long (1985) does not diverge from it but recalls that there has always been a 'rocky road for collaboration,' permeated by overlapping goals and conflictual interests. These conflictual interests are primarily visible in issues related to the Israeli role in the Middle East, Western pressure for democratization, and views on internal affairs interventions or meddling. These elements touch on the many cultural chasms between the countries, driving Long (1985) to call them 'ambivalent allies.' Cordesman (2016) recognizes that a shallow understanding between societies is a source of tension. When there are no pressuring economic or securitarian demands, Saudis and Americans lack the typical cultural or societal proximity of allies.

Some analysts focused on moments when non-material factors intensified the relationship. To Partrick (2016) and Pollack (2002), strategic interests combined with genuine anti-communism and anti-revisionism convictions during the Cold War. They stress the value

of non-material factors in shaping the relations without abandoning the logic that the nature of the ties is strategic, not cultural. Bronson (2006) investigates the relations since the Cold War to argue that their shared interest rested not only on oil but also on the geostrategic importance of the kingdom's religious identity. She explores how both countries framed Islam in opposition to Arab nationalism and revisionism. Without ignoring the relevance of tangible factors, she asserts that religion provided a protective political layer to the partnership. Similarly, Kumar (2018) analyzes how traditional English-speaking media sympathetically described Islam as moderated in opposition to Arab nationalism during the Cold War. These authors highlight how the countries manipulated ideological and religious factors as tools to gain power, prestige, and influence.

Like the US-Iran literature, the US-Saudi one also reflects timely political events. The 9/11 World Trade Center attacks unleashed criticism from the United States and Saudi Arabia. Consequently, a trend in the literature deals with global terrorism. According to Long (2004), there was a wave of harshly critical commentary from Saudi Arabian bashing among Americans and anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia. Publications and media outlets served to spread these sentiments among the populations. Some scholars extrapolate the cultural differences to condemn the relations, feeding public outrage. Gold (2004), for example, while providing exhaustive research over the roots of Wahhabism, brings a cultural exceptionalism study that resonated with Islamophobe propaganda. Al-Rasheed (2010, p. 233) also brings critical light to the many think-tanks consultants, policymakers, and academics that started to connect Wahhabism to extremism for their narratives' benefits.

To Partrick (2016, p. 362), history, personality, experiences, and prejudices significantly influence decisions in the Middle East. The United States and Saudi Arabia share strong, pragmatic ties derived from their shared goals of maintaining regional stability. Mason (2014) underlines that the shared threats feed arms sales and the military-military relations, an essential cornerstone of their ties. Despite disagreements over the Israel-Palestine to the role of Islam, Washington and Riyadh consistently reaffirmed the importance of working with each other. The relations have been 'troubled since its birth at the summit on the Quincy' as kings and presidents have little in common (Riedel 2018, p. 184). In a more pessimistic view, they are trapped in a 'marriage from which there is no divorce' (Long 2004, p. 36).

In short, the US-Saudi literature focuses on the pragmatic, long-standing nature of the ties. Most of the literature is descriptive, providing relevant diplomatic and historical narratives with comprehensive primary sources (Long 1985; Al-Rasheed 2010; Riedel 2018). The few that invested in IR-driven analysis orbited Realism, as they all agree that what brings the United States and Saudi Arabia together is shared national interests (Bowman 2005; Mason 2014; Partrick 2016). They stress that, since the 1970s, both actors have agreed on the ideal regional order: one that is stable, without hegemonical competition, and where the oil flows freely. Thus, cultural values are not a driver of their ‘alliance,’ but an issue that leaders in both countries proactively chose to ignore, despite some criticism among media and the populations. This way, there is an overall consensus in the literature about the relational pattern being the oil-for-security bargain.

Nevertheless, many authors expanded this frame to question shared threats, anxiety toward change, and fear of regional instability (Long 2009; Gause 2011; Mason 2014). They argue that the level of commitment between the actors fluctuates according to how leaders perceive the continuity of local order. In other words, the literature focuses on the issue of perception and leadership. While most authors avoid discussing cultural or identitarian issues as relevant for the partnership, Bronson (2006) makes the interesting point that the West has often framed Saudi Islam as an alternative to more revisionist identities or transnational movements. This way, she pinpoints how cognitive elements can work together with the security-for-oil frame as yet another relational layer beyond geopolitical issues.

A final element that is often stressed is the unbalanced interdependency between these two actors, not only in security issues but also in economic ones (Citino 2002; Vitalis 2007; Grey 2017). These authors remind us that the relations are a typical core-peripheral one, with asymmetrical levels of dependency. However, few authors explore how this dependency affects other interactions between the Saudis and Americans. Iran is often framed as a shared annoyance for both actors, with very few analyses reflecting on how the moments of Iran-Saudi rapprochement manifested in the US-Saudi dyad, for example. The level of interconnectivity between these three actors, which is the topic of this thesis, is not stressed by the dyad’s literature, further justifying this ongoing investigation.

2.3.3 Saudi Arabia and Iran

The Saudi-Iranian ties are the dyad that had fluctuated the most throughout the decades. Today, they are often defined as an ‘institutionalized competition’ (Partrick 2016, p. 112), a ‘not-so-hidden rivalry’ (Sadegui and Ahmadian 2011, p. 130), or a ‘multifront Cold War’ (Hiro 2018, p. 357). However, that has not always been the case. Iran and Saudi Arabia shared some collaborative moments, leaning towards cooperation and coordination in broad matters related to security, economics, and religion. Despite noticeable ethnic, religious, and political differences, they have experienced continuous variations in the character of their ties, passing through periods of tension, conflict, de-escalation, détente, and re-escalation. Therefore, the literature reflects the attempts to explore and explain those fluctuations' patterns and motivators.

One can divide the literature into four fields. First, there are outstanding and influential contributions from historians. Cooper (2012) and al-Saud (2003) provide excellent books rich in primary sources, interviews, and anecdotes from the times before the Iranian Revolution. They stress how King Faisal (1964-1975) and Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979) were vital for the strategic collaboration during the 1970s. Similarly, Hiro (2018) delivers an extensive study about Iran and Saudi Arabia's struggle for leadership since their inception as modern states into the current days, focusing on their religious and socio-economic differences. More recently, Ghattas (2020) provided a historical, journalistic review of how Iranian and Saudi Arabian cultural rivalry plays out in the Middle East. She explores more than forty years to argue that three events in 1979 (the Iranian Revolution, the Siege of Mecca, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) created a legacy of enmity between the actors that affects the regional stability.

The other three fields consist of those that explain the Saudi-Iranian ties by the balance of power (Fürting 2002; Gause 2014), those that focus on identitarian differences as the primary driver of their interactions (Wehrey et al. 2009; Soltaninejad 2019), and those that combine international and domestic factors to draw explanations (Okruhlik 2003; Mabon 2016). The first group investigates how Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for territory, oil prices, and military supremacy. Balance of power approaches argues that the countries’ threat perception increases or reduces accordingly to capacities distribution, leading to the fluctuating scenarios of rivalry and rapprochement. For example, both Terrill (2011) and Gause (2014) claim that the current rivalry results from a balance shock after Saddam Hussein’s fall in 2003. Iraq became a place for Iran and Saudi Arabia to compete for influence and gain more power. For these authors, both

countries took advantage of religious and identitarian narratives to compete better, manipulating sectarianism to justify their behavior. Therefore, despite the critical sectarian element, this ‘Cold War scenario’ was still a balance of power game (Gause 2014, p. 4).

Nevertheless, most authors adopting the balance of power approach broaden the security concept, including political and societal expressions of (in)security beyond the traditional military one. Chubin and Tripp (1996), Fürtig (2002), and Keynoush (2016) contend that the two countries compete for power while religious and identitarian factors are playing an active role in increasing or reducing the perceptions of security of other actors. For example, Chubin and Tripp (1996, p. 71) argue that after 1979 there were two competing conceptions of political Islam (conservative Sunni vs. revolutionary Shia), which are the projected as inspirational models to others. Therefore, these authors open the state's black box to recognize that the countries use contending, non-material elements such as religious sectarianism, tribalism, and ethnicity to gain grounds in their race for allies, hearts, and minds in the Persian Gulf.

Their main argument is that the balance of power explains the nature of the conflict, but further investigation of threats is needed to assess the used mechanisms to increase power. Aarts and van Duijne (2009, p. 72) state that ‘sectarian narratives and competition for Islamic leadership shapes relations but does not define them.’ In this sense, these authors reject sectarianism or other phenomena derived from identitarian differences as drivers of regional conflict. To Fürtig (2002), Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq balanced each other, with two actors joining forces to contain a third one perceived as the most significant threat. While asserting that balancing is a national interest product, he recognizes that regional competition is pushed further by ideological differences and the divergences between Persian and Arab cultures.

This focus on threat perception relates to Iran and Saudi Arabia's policymaking ideational factors. Their self-perceived images, preferred regional order, and ideological missions (to the region and the *ummah*) play a ‘catalytic role in shaping and directing policies towards each other’ (Sadegui and Ahmadian 2011, p. 116). As Hiro (2018) argues, a common feature between the two is a claim to Islamic exceptionalism. Iran perceives itself as a promoter of Islamic revolutions, an anti-imperialist bastion, and an example of Shia resistance. Conversely, Saudi Arabia is a Wahhabist monarchy close to the Western powers that aim to guarantee a Sunni's conservative order.

The third grouping in this literature suggests that religious prominence defines the relations' nature. Soltaninejad (2019, p. 110) employs Constructivism as a bridge between ideology and rationalism, presenting interesting insights on Iranian foreign policy's ideological dimensions. His choice, however, resulted in framing Iran's ideology in opposition to Saudi Arabia's rationality, implying a false dichotomy that one country is rational and the other is not. Many Constructivists, such as Majin (2017) and Ahmadian (2018), risk overestimating the role of religion as the main dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia, overlooking structural factors. They rightly stress that 'stories, narratives, exaggerations, and distortion of the realities' often intertwine the conflict (Majin 2017, p. 66). Nevertheless, by affirming that 'religious, ideological and identity schism' made them 'fated to be rivals' (Ahmadian 2018, p. 133), these approaches draw near determinism, ignoring that both actors had already collaborated on a plethora of topics. Cooperation periods show that Tehran and Riyadh can forsake religious tensions to address geopolitical considerations (Bahgat 2000; Okruhlik 2003; Keynoush 2016).

These explanations based on the identities in Iran and Saudi Arabia tend to forsake the centrality of systemic pressures and constraints over international politics. Focusing only on how individuals assess interests and threats can also be problematic for suggesting that alterations in the system are dependent only on domestic political decisions. While those are highly significant, Keynoush (2016: 18) recaps that Saudi Arabian and Iranian politics are subjected to external pressures and cannot be explained only by individual tastes, ideological choices, or leadership styles. For Ehteshami (2008), theological or ideological differences intensify conflict, not generate them. As Gause (2014, p. 5) concludes, a sectarian approach 'can distort analytical focus' by oversimplifying and neglecting that 'Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived in harmony for many more years of Islamic history than they have fought.'

Moreover, ideational ambitions shaping Saudi-Iranian relations do not reduce themselves to religious matters. As Aarts and van Duijne (2009) stress, Saudi Arabia and Iran disagree about the US's role in the region. Their divergence is ideational, mirroring different visions on how the regional order should be. While for the Saudis, the United States plays an integral role in ensuring security, for Iranians, geopolitical arrangements should be left for those within the Persian Gulf (Mabon 2018, p. 8). Keynoush (2016, p. 14) takes a step further, arguing that foreign meddling triggered the rivalry by disrupting the regional balance of power. However, by pointing to the US's role as the cause, she discards hegemonic conceptions of the

Iran-Saudi Arabian competition, implying that there would be no instability without Washington's action. While correctly pointing out that ideological or religious differences were not initially sources of conflict, she errs by not appreciating that nationalist or ethnic rhetoric, together with competitive national interests, instigate the competition continuity.

Finally, the fourth group within the literature intends to balance external, internal, material, and non-material elements via creative research designs. Bahgat (2000), Okruhlik (2003), Aarts and van Duijne (2009) concentrate on the 1990s rapprochement decade to stress the domestic and international factors that reduced tensions. Okruhlik (2003) states that a series of common interests and competent diplomatic maneuvers fostered cooperation incentives. She underlines a nexus between concerns with the price oil market and the accumulation of regional tensions in Israel, Iraq, and Afghanistan as motivations for rapprochement. Similarly, Aarts and van Duijne (2009, p. 72) state there are securitarian and economic areas where they can cooperate and reduce tensions because both rely on stable and profitable oil markets. Bahgat (2000) also insists on the economic element, arguing that a shared concern in stabilizing the oil market drove leaders to reduce sectarian rhetoric.

Iran and Saudi Arabia also frequently compete in the economic arena, and some analysis focuses on exploring their relationship effects on the oil market. Luke (1985) selects dependency theory to investigate Saudi-Iranian disagreements at OPEC, while Mason (2014) employs a hybrid form of Constructivism to explore the dispute over production, pricing, security of supply, and demand. Sadegui and Ahmadian (2011) list four other realms, together with OPEC, where Iran and Saudi Arabia often show a low profile rivalry: religion, the United States' role, supremacy in the Persian Gulf, and the expansion of regional influence. They argue that the relations' patterns reflected a limited contest, which allowed political leaders to transition from conflict to cooperation depending on the level of mutual threat perception.

This focus on mutual threats and different arenas of competition are also in Mabon's (2016) study, which uses analytical eclecticism to examine how ethnic, religious, and tribal identities produce internal identity incongruences with ramifications for security. He suggests that rivalry plays in two spheres, ideological and geopolitical. Competing identities, such as ethnonational and religious identities, drive the first. The second sphere relates to Riyadh's and Tehran's claim for influence over the Persian Gulf, which became even more pertinent after the decline of Iraq as a regional power in 2003. Thus, they continuously play a 'delicate balance act

seeking to preserve territorial integrity, ideological sovereignty, domestic and international legitimacy, and regime security' (Mabon 2016, p. 195). However, in his model, the system's impact has been mostly left out. Moreover, by omitting the Saudi-Iranian relations' interlocks with the US-Saudi and the US-Iranian dyads, he deemphasizes critical points for understanding the regional security dilemma he set to explain. Hence, this gap this thesis attempts to fulfill.

In short, the Iran-Saudi Arabia literature is the one that is mostly IR driven by the three dyads. Authors have found these complex bilateral relations fruitful for studying the balance of power, threat perception, ideological competition, sectarianism, and geopolitical rivalry. This review showed that scholars have diverged about the main driver of the competition – power or religion – and whether there is even one driver only or a mix of several. Issues of territory, oil, Islamic exceptionalism, regional influence, military supremacy, and disagreements about the US role are prominent in these analyses.

Moreover, there is no scholarly agreeance if the relationship can be classified as a rivalry, an estranged friendship, a competition, or a limited contest. A historical exploration shows that the two countries have shared periods of tension, conflict, de-escalation, and re-escalation, lacking a pattern. The literature tends to reflect this variation, often making temporal delimitations to their study to emphasize moments of détente (Bahgat 2000; Okruhlik 2003; Al Toraifi 2012) or hostile rivalry (Wehrey et al. 2009; Terrill 2011; Rich 2012; Gause 2014). The studies that did employ a larger timeframe that includes these variations tended towards a more descriptive analysis (Hiro 2018; Ghattas 2020) or avoided focusing on the United States as a key actor with a proactive role in the regional system (Fürtig 2002; Mabon 2016).

2.4 Conclusions

This chapter discussed how one could understand the Persian Gulf as the regional system and presented a literature review on the three bilateral relations that compose the triangle. This review informs the theoretical framework construction and the definition of time frames and analytical scope. First, it outlined the Persian Gulf throughout its historical inception as a sub-regional system and defined its central characteristics: oil, transnational religion elements, high militarization, and the US's presence. This exercise also showcases the four systemic events that altered the balance of power: the British withdrawal on the eve of the 1970s, the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Gulf War (1990), and the 2003 Iraq invasion. In the next chapter, I operationalize these findings to outline the four study cases better.

Second, the review of the dyads satisfies the demands for the intervening variables selection. It provided an in-depth analysis of the studied object, outlining elements needed to increase the explanatory value of any investigation of the three countries' relations. I detected three types of elements within the region: *ideational*, *cognitive*, and *leadership*. First, the three countries are relevant to the three countries, issues related to ambition, maintenance or revision of the regional order, anxiety towards the status quo, leadership, and missionarism. For example, many specialists highlighted Iran's revisionist behavior or how much Saudi Arabia and the United States are dependable on the status quo's continuity. Therefore, one category for operationalizing intervening variables should be ideational.

The review also indicated that self-images, roles, dogmas, and narratives of exceptionalism are frequent in the three dyads. While the imagery of hostility and inherent antagonism characterizes the US-Iran dyad, Islamism, ethnic differences, and sectarianism profoundly influence the Iran-Saudi one. Even for the US-Saudi case, which is marked mainly by its pragmatism, authors diverge on pinpointing identity preferences as a problematic issue or another political layer to the partnership. In other words, these self-images are often viewed as conditioners for deeper ties or prolonged disaffection in the dyads, indicating that cognitive factors play on the triangulation, being a second category for my intervening variables.

Finally, the review indicates the importance of leadership in giving continuity or changing the dyads. A significant part of the literature investigated kings, presidents, and other foreign policy executives as interfering in the process of determining a country's international agenda. Their mindsets, preferences, political affiliations, experiences, and grievances seem to be an element taken into account by the three actors. Many of the studies had tested relations during the rule of one particular leader or explored how leadership change resulted in a more or less collaborative regional agenda. Moreover, only by analyzing leaders can one detect the discursive field in which these images, enmities, rivalries, and friendships are repeated and reinforced. Thus, leadership should be a third category of intervening in the theoretical framework.

3. Framing the triangle: theoretical discussions

This chapter justifies the choice of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) and outlines my plan to investigate the relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In the chapter's first part, I introduce a discussion about the artificial division of labor between area studies and the IR, focusing on how a particularism vs. universalism dilemma has conditioned the analytical preferences within the International Relations of the Middle East (IRME). Next, I show how IRME's evolved towards analytical eclecticism, which, despite its advances in practical theorizing, has limitations regarding general disciplinary contributions. In the chapter's second part, I present NCR as an effective alternative to explore the Middle East's international politics that circumvent some analytical eclecticism's shortfalls. Here, I delve into the NCR literature, discussing its foundations, main objectives, core values, and methodological preferences. The chapter's final part builds the thesis's analytical framework. I first present the selection of variables, which are: power (independent variable), status satisfaction, regime identity, foreign policy executives (intervening variables), and the strategic triangle (dependent variable), to then establish the explanative chain that I apply in the following four chapters.

3.1 Regional Studies vs. International Relations

On the eve of the 2000s, some IRME scholars raised awareness about the shaky relationship between Middle East studies (MES) and IR, claiming the IRME's body of literature was at a suboptimal development level (Gerges 1991; Gause 1999; Tessler 1999; Valbjørn 2004b; Teti 2007). They argue that, in a vicious circle, MES scholars avoided interacting with IR's concepts and theories, whereas IR scholars rejected producing theories about the region. This critique did not belong only to the IRME but to many other Social Sciences fields and was concerned with issues of power of knowledge, politics within disciplinary areas, and ways of understanding places outside the Euro-American center. In a nutshell, Area Studies' place within academia has been the subject of an ongoing debate for more than two decades (Valbjørn 2004b; Hurrell 2020; Shami and Miller-Idriss 2016). Many disciplinarians argued that Area Studies evoke narrowness and unnecessary intellectual restrictions that isolate their object of study (Teti 2007). In IR, these critiques are skeptical about specializing in one particular region, considering that increasingly buzzing topics, such as immigration and the environment, ignore geographical borders.

If we look into the origins of Area Studies, both the American and the European versions, it was prone to parochialism and exoticization, often creating and reproducing discriminatory representations of non-Western regions, something Said (1978) famously denounced. In Europe, Area Studies were a part of Cultural Studies, feeding information about ‘exotic regions’ to imperialist and colonization projects (Valbjørn 2004b; Teti 2007). In the United States, it emerged as a program to update the US government about ‘world regions’ during the Cold War, a legacy that still largely shapes the field (Shami and Miller-Idriss 2016, p. 8; Aris 2020, p. 5). MES was no exception, originating as a Western enterprise that produced knowledge about ‘exotic people’ and ‘exceptional countries’ for the political interest of dominant others (Gerges 1991, p. 214; Stein 2012, p. 882). It offered interpretations that overemphasized the Middle East’s cultural, political, and religious particularities, condemning it to the status of being beyond comparison (Teti 2007, p. 128).

In the 1980s, as the US Social Sciences moved towards rationalist epistemologies and behaviorist methodologies, area specialists distanced themselves from disciplinary parsimony, producing in-deep analyses that underlined the elements in which regions were distinct from others (Valbjørn 2004b, p. 55).⁴ Thus, an artificial division of labor emerged: Social Sciences were a problem-solving discipline producing generalizations, while Area Studies produced rich, practical, contextual work on regions (Shami and Miller-Idriss 2016, p. 11). While area specialists should cover the uncouth and exotic regions, Social Scientists should produce universal knowledge (Bilgin 2015). Two decades of forcefully differentiating the two fields segregated Area Studies and Social Sciences students, establishing barriers for intellectual exchange.

The discipline of International Relations was taken over by the behaviorist wave in the 1980s (Halliday 1994). IR emerged as a function of great power competition, infused by the politics of race, nationalism, wars, and imperialism (Buzan and Acharya 2019, p. 44). During the Cold War, the US’s academic system began to dictate the discipline’s politics, and IR turned into what Hoffman (1977) called an ‘American Science.’ The urge to maintain the US’s political domination relegated a significant part of the world to a peripheral position in the disciplinary knowledge production (Buzan and Lawson 2015, p. 62). The scholarship mostly rejected

⁴ Simultaneously, the end of the Cold War provoked a defunding of the many public and private institutions and foundations that invested in regional studies centers (Shami and Miller-Idriss 2016, p. 9).

particularism favoring universalist theories grounded on scientific explanations that reflected the US experience (Fawcett 2020, pp. 9–10). As a result, IR has been US-dominated, ignoring or silencing the history and agency from the Global South. Much mainstream IR still has a narrow sense of what the international *is*, seeing intra-Western politics as World Politics (Buzan and Acharya 2019, p. 3; Hurrell 2016, p. 6). That resulted in a disconnection between IR dominant concepts and the realities that non-Western scholars perceive and analyze (Wæver and Tickner 2009; Buzan and Acharya 2019, pp. 2–4).

In conclusion, Area Studies and IR originated amidst parochialism. The first tended towards stressing regional idiosyncrasies, whereas the second often fell into pitfalls of reductionism. However, do regions essentially differentiate themselves from one another, or are patterns of international politics equal everywhere, independently of where a country is? This provocation to opt between universalism and particularism has challenged any IR scholar specializing in a region, being in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, or South Asia. To Halliday (2005), an efficient IR theory is about the nature of the international structure and the patterns of relations between states, needing to be, thus, conceptually clear and rigorous, historically aware, and yielding substantive analysis. It should provide conceptual frames that help the researcher choose the appropriate analysis level, categorize phenomena, and identify patterns. If the discipline's object of inquiry is the interaction between actors in a supra-national context, one expects different regions to produce different traditions for understanding these realities. This project can thrive precisely in subfields such as IRME, considering that is where Area Studies and IR scholars meet.

3.2 The Global IR critique: bringing the area back in

This thesis subscribes to the Global IR movement, first idealized as such by Acharya (2014). It consists of mapping the study of IR globally, detecting and examining how the study of international politics varies in different parts of the world (Buzan 2009; Hellmann and Valbjørn 2017). Global IR is not a theory but an initiative to seek better tools to grasp the international order and make global inquiries that reflect the world's intricate power diffusion and many social-economic and political challenges. This call to decentralize the discipline's mainstream pushes scholars toward interdisciplinary, particularly regional studies (Buzan and Acharya 2019; Hurrell 2020; Fawcett 2017). A scholar committed to Global IR should grasp Area Studies as geographically bounded intellectual spaces where researchers from different

backgrounds seek cases, concepts, and voices, exploring and expanding their knowledge boundaries (Nicolaïdis 2020). As Fawcett (2020, p. 10) puts it, work in the interface of IR and Area Studies is necessarily an interdisciplinary task that combines the first's cross-cutting theories with the second's abundant contextual analysis.

The call for plurality does not mean cultural essentialism or excessive relativism. While it is crucial to understand how different regional actors ascribe meaning to their actions concerning culture, history, and politics, one must be suspicious of culturalist accounts. In IR, one must be concerned about the politics of culture, not the culture itself (Hurrell 2020, p. 25). Moreover, excessive relativism can maintain what is produced in the non-Western world confined to its borders (Buzan 2016; Gelardi 2019, p. 10). Restricting non-Western phenomena to macro units of analysis (such as the Islamic World, the Chinese values, or the Latin-American governance style) can be counterproductive for Global IR because it ignores the interconnectivity between such units (Hurrell 2016, p. 15). When the culture is the cause of a political event, the concepts and ideas developed for that analysis cannot be applied in other cases, not contributing to IR's de-Westernizing. Bilgin (2015) stresses that some authors who criticized the mainstream ended up creating concepts as divisive as the Western ones, injecting more parochialism and cultural inwardness within the fields.⁵

Moreover, reducing Western parochialism in IR does not mean abandoning traditional analytical and theoretical categories. While more radical critiques call for a complete dismantling of the discipline, Global IR agrees with authors arguing that most IR traditions used today are inadequate but remain indispensable (Ayooob 2002; Chakrabarty 2000; Hurrell 2016). Notions such as security dilemma, anarchy, and power balance, developed by Western academia, are pertinent worldwide. It is crucial to be aware that regional politics are happening within an international system and cannot be disconnected from it. Therefore, what is needed is a recalibration of the *international* in IR, connecting scholarly communities and their different understandings (Hellmann and Valbjørn 2017). This way, Global IR suggests advancing the discipline by inclusion and reimagination, embracing and promoting academic power diffusion.

It is interesting to think that there is an 'academic world market' (Bilgin 2008) in which concepts, theories, and approaches are advertised – some of them are bought, others not. They

⁵ A case in particular was after the 9/11 attacks when many MES scholars began to stress regional particularities and cultural differences to explain political conflict and failures of democracy (Wedeen 2016, p. 53).

then travel, adapt, and adjust to explain local realities. As Aris (2020, p. 4) puts it, a discipline's status reflects its capacity to produce tradeable goods that influence other disciplines, contesting and transforming disciplinary power relations and knowledge production's boundaries. Thus, a good IR practice is to think critically about how ideas, traditions, and theories travel worldwide, discussing these travails, connecting and comparing them (Fawcett 2020). Hellmann and Valbjørn (2017) consider four ideal types of dialogues between Area Studies and IR: eristic, hierarchical, reflexive, and transformative. While the first two do not challenge labor division between discipline and area, the other two propose a two-way conversation between peers that can reduce parochialism in both fields.

Global IR, epistemologically and ontologically, instigates these dialogues of reflexive and transformative nature. However, most of the dialogue between Area Studies and IR is still eristic or hierarchical, meaning they do not aim at a mutual intellectual exchange. Aris (2020) makes a comprehensive citation analysis and concludes that the knowledge exchange between both fields is still trivial and not balanced, as IR scholars cite much fewer Area Studies than the other way around. Generically speaking, IR continues to be a 'fragmented discipline discussing grand debates' (Kristensen 2018). With this critique in mind and aiming at improving the reflexive and transformative dialogues between the discipline and Area Studies, the following section enters the thesis's topic and explores how IR theory has been transported, adapted, transformed, and (re)produced in the Middle East.

3.3 Explaining the International Relations of the Middle East

Like many other multidisciplinary projects, an intellectual divide permeates International Relations of the Middle East (IRME): some scholars have an IR background, and others have an Area Studies specialization. Within IRME, regional particularities can blind MES scholars, whereas IR researchers can be blinded to any idiosyncrasies not visible in the West (Valbjørn 2004b, p. 53). On the one hand, MES scholars tended to escape universalistic discussions, preferring detailed analyses of the local. On the other hand, IR scholars avoided selecting Middle Eastern countries because they were too unique. Therefore, IRME exemplified how most of the IR(s) of non-Western countries struggle to emancipate from the normative and prescriptive functions of being in a cross-section of a 'very American discipline.'

After almost two decades since these discussions emerged, many outstanding works combining in-depth knowledge and IR theories took IRME a further step toward intellectual

pluralism (Gause 2010; Hinnebusch 2014; Rubin 2016; Darwich 2019). They apply an eclectic combination of theories and concepts to better cope with regional particularities while highlighting the cruciality of the system. Nevertheless, some authors agree that this evolution is still far from its potential (Fawcett 2017; Busse 2018; Darwich and Kaarbo 2020). First, a not insignificant part of the scholarly insists on an eristic dialogue, interacting with the other field only to attest they are correct and others are wrong. Some insist on cultural essentialism to explain Middle Eastern events, whereas others forcefully fit the region into Western-made concepts without adaption. Second, the dialogue is still mostly hierarchical, in the sense that IR scholars see MES as a shop providing local empirical data for them to apply a theory, not a space for dialogue, intellectual exchange, or transformation (Hellmann and Valbjørn 2017; Darwich and Kaarbo 2020).

The following two subsections dive into these preferences further. In the first subsection, I review two frequent IR paradigms applied to the Middle East, Neorealism and Constructivism, to argue that both theories have shown themselves insufficient to grasp international politics in their ‘pure’ form.⁶ The Middle East seems to reject excessively parsimonious or particularistic analyses, and most IRME scholars seem to agree. I explore this affirmation further in the second subsection, presenting the main arguments and contributions of those applying eclectic frameworks. I conclude by arguing that despite its unquestionable contribution to the evolution of IRME, this broad analytical eclecticism has so far only tangentially contributed to the Global IR, keeping the region on the periphery of knowledge production.

3.3.1 Parsimony and particularism in IRME

Waltz (1959) transformed IR by conceptualizing three levels of analysis for international politics: the individual, the state, and the system. The system, or the third level, is anarchical because no superior authority regulates how states interact. Thus, anarchy causes international events, such as the formation of alliances, rivalries, war, and others (Mearsheimer 2001). Self-help motivations and the eagerness to survive drive states to maximize gains within a system where power is distributed unequally and information is not plenty (van Evera 1999). These conditions are so preeminent that states can be perceived as black boxes with the single interest

⁶ Here it is important to stress that Neoliberalism or Institutionalism, traditional IR tenets, are almost inexistent in the IRME studies. They are often synthesized with other theoretical principles in eclectic analytical approaches, as other sections further discuss, but not applied in their ‘pure’ form. Thus, the review in this section has focused only on the two main strands of IR that specialists employ.

of survival, rationally transmitting systemic inputs into international politics. That became the core tenet of Neorealism, which promptly popularized and became the most recurrent IR paradigm (Kristensen 2018, p. 253).

While some have chosen Neorealism to study the region due to the high level of interstate conflicts, sheer Neorealist studies are not as frequent as one expects in the Middle East. Neorealism consolidated itself as the theory of studying war, security, and power competition. Which better region to investigate such phenomena than the Middle East? It is a region marked by the memory of wars, a high degree of militarization, and several foreign interventions (Hinnebusch 2003; Fawcett 2016b; Ryan 2019). Local countries are often tasked with the double burden of responding to the destabilizing effects of external interventions that exacerbate their vulnerabilities while attempting to grasp new security concerns raising daily (Abboud et al. 2018, p. 274). Nevertheless, most Neorealist applications to the region come with a twist, adapting the theory to local particularities.

One cannot talk about Neorealism and the Middle East without eventually mentioning Walt's (1987) *The Origins of Alliances*, which argues that countries balance power and threats simultaneously within the anarchical structure. He presents a refinement of Neorealism's reliance on power as the sole determinant of international politics, contending that states assess threats according to not only others' capabilities but also geographical factors, aggressive intent, among others. However, Walt does not present a way to examine such factors nor clarify what intent meant in his framework. While he recognizes that different elements within the state can affect politics, he does not challenge Neorealism's refusal to open the state's black box further.

Neorealism is alluring to IRME because states often engage in strategic games and balancing acts to increase power and maximize security. Many local conflicts can be explained under the logic of anarchy and mistrust (Gause 1999; Walt 1987). Moreover, a structural approach provides methodological sophistication and rigor – something desired when studying complex objects, lacking access to information, or seeking comparisons. Also key is the difficulty of accessing material and the lack of accountable institutions, which compels authors to use frameworks that do not open the black box of the state (Lawson 2016, pp. 23–27). Nonetheless, only the structure cannot account for the inherent particularities that affect how policies are made. In this sense, overly parsimonious studies will inevitably produce misrepresented and incomplete interpretations of reality (Halliday 2005).

Critics argue that Neorealism's materialist simplification overlooks local dynamics and excludes those not belonging to the upper ranks of power distribution (Ryan 2019; Lawson 2016). Moreover, it insists on claiming validity across time, culture, and space, rejecting historicizing or localizing its concepts (Foulon and Meibauer 2020, 4). As its concepts are all created by and for the West, claiming that they are valid everywhere implies the constant exclusion of non-Western voices. Moreover, Neorealists tend to ignore how the colonial legacy and the core-peripheral divisions of world politics keep upholding the international order (Buzan and Acharya 2019, p. 154). While structure constrains policy choices at the regional and international levels, the Middle East political game is not dictated only by them, as many other domestic and regional elements affect decisions (Gause 2010, p. 8). Elements found in the domestic political realm influence decision-making, something Neorealism fails to recognize for insisting on ahistoricism (Rubin 2016). By overlooking the importance of state formation, transnational identities, and ideologies, Neorealism shows narrowness and restrictiveness, not being satisfactory to understanding the political events of the region (Gause 2010, p. 9).

Constructivism has shown itself as an alternative to Neorealism by suggesting that facts depend on socially established conventions (Ryan 2019). It argues that the relations between agency and structure have a dual, co-constitutive character that cannot be predefined by hierarchy, as 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992). Constructivists grasp the international system as intersubjective, reflecting the constant interaction between agency and structure over social norms and ideas (Wendt 1992; Hopf 1998). Constructivists broaden IR topics, bringing light to be crucial yet undervalued, non-material factors, such as beliefs, ideas, culture, ideology, and identity. That is why, under Constructivism, interests and threats are not self-evident products of the anarchical structure but consequences of expectations, perceptions, identities, and norms (Lawson 2016, p. 29).

Within IRME, Constructivism became a starting point to emphasize the manifestations of identities and social norms within the state, examining discourses, rhetoric, language, symbols, and images as key elements influencing regional politics (Teti 2007, p. 135; Stein 2012, p. 891). What Walt is for Neorealists working on the Middle East, Barnett is for IRME's Constructivists. His landmark *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (1998) focuses on Arabism to explain alliance making. Barnett shows how transnational identities could justify choices and alter international politics, proving that non-material variables matter to explain IRME. However, he

neglects many exceptions to his argument, particularly those related to the bipolar international structure during the Cold War (Gause 1999, p. 16; Stein 2012, p. 905). Assuming there was no hierarchy between agency and structure, Barnett falls into the pitfall of giving little attention to the relationship between norms and the material structure, overemphasizing agency while neglecting that states are dependable on the distribution of power (Hinnebusch 2003, p. 60). Moreover, he does not specify the conditions for ideational forces to outweigh material ones, providing a theory that is tricky to reproduce (Darwich 2019, p. 5).

Some authors follow Barnett's exercise of putting unit-level factors in the center for their analysis without structural pre-constraints. For example, Lynch (1999) explores how the Jordanian national identity guided its foreign policy's inconsistencies. Adib-Moghaddam (2006) presents a cultural genealogical investigation to explain the historical cycles of violence that permeated the Persian Gulf, focusing on language, manufactured images, and experiences. While Lynch keeps the state as the main actor of foreign policy and avoids philosophical deconstructions of the state, Adib-Moghaddam provides a complex deconstruction of its function and role in international politics. Others such as Ulrichsen (2015), Mabon (2018), and Kamrava (2011) find the Copenhagen School, a European strain of Constructivism, a valuable tool to grasp how Middle Eastern countries manipulate identity to gain political support.

Constructivists agree on the inclusion of local particularities for a higher explanatory level. However, when it comes to the IRME, they struggle or are unwilling to transform their incorporation of domestic factors into theoretical progress or operationalize variables in a coherent explanation chain. Most importantly, they have a generalization problem as they diverge in methods, states' social character, and epistemology, making it challenging to reach a scholarly consensus about what matters and not in the region's international politics. In this sense, they are yet to find a shared research agenda. Constructivism is often unsatisfactory for those seeking analytical guidelines, well-defined concepts, or replicable models for policy-relevant research (Hadfield-Amkhan 2010, p. 17; Darwich and Kaarbo 2020, p. 233). In a nutshell, Constructivism works more as an ontological lens than a cohesive IR theory.

Unit-level factors are required to study the Middle East because they provide explanatory leverage. For example, only by accessing identities, sovereignty porousness, and regime resilience can one contemplate alignments, conflicts, and motivations properly. However, while these elements are essential, one should not overstate them because the state system has proved

itself durable and robust (Fawcett 2016a). Ideas, identities, cultures, and norms alone are insufficient to understand how states interact if not accompanied by an approach that clarifies their operationalization within the system (Hadfield-Amkhan 2010, pp. 27–28). They affect international politics when projected in an institutional and political context and when others react to them. Whereas Constructivism’s value in challenging problematic preconceptions is undeniable, its progressiveness in Lakatosian terms is questionable at the least. It risks overlooking indispensable survival requirements, inequality of power distribution, material limitations, and other systemic determinants (Halliday 2005, pp. 30–33). In other words, unit-level factors should not be reduced to epiphenomena but considered in sync with systemic pressures.

Both Neorealism and Constructivism have shown themselves insufficient to grasp the region’s complexity. The first drives scholars to disregard non-power factors over state action, and the second mostly disregards systemic primacy in the definition of national interests. Nevertheless, a review of the IRME produced today reveals a tacit agreement between scholars: the Middle East demands a rejection of the absolutes. Most scholars have shown awareness of the trickiness of using Neorealism or Constructivism to grasp the region’s complexity. While some employ historical sociology to explore state-formation and the effect of core-peripheral dependencies on international politics (Halliday 2005), others use English School to explore how religious institutions and political culture influence the international society (Hashmi 2009; Mandelsohn 2012; Dessouki 2015). Moreover, some focus on Post-Structuralist discussions about the link between the production of IR theories and global political trends (Valbjørn 2004a; Bilgin 2005). Nevertheless, most IRME authors have evolved towards analytical eclecticism, mixing and matching different approaches and insights to create more nuanced analyses. Thus, the following section discusses this evolution, stressing its contributions and limitations.

3.3.2 IRME’s analytical eclecticism

Many IRME authors invest in analytical eclecticism, a practical approach that extricates, translates, and selectively integrates elements of different paradigms (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). In general, these IRME’s eclectics keep some Neorealist tenets, such as anarchy predominance and security dilemma, while adding Constructivist insights about unit-level factors that influence international politics. Most of them start with Walt’s modified Neorealist approach, which includes intentions as one of the sources of threats within the Middle East (Nonemman

2005; Rubin 2016; Hinnebusch 2014; Darwich 2019). From then on, they open the state's black box to explore what are intentions and which types of threat actors detect, investigating how identity, religion, and ideology affect the calculation of motivations and interests.

Most IRME's analytical eclecticists say that states balance simultaneous threats from domestic, regional, and international levels, affecting their alliances and policies (Ryan 2009; Gause 2010; Darwich 2019).⁷ For example, Hinnebusch (2014) develops a Complex Realist theory by combining Realism, Constructivism, Marxism, and Historical Sociology. He argues that while regional actors' first interest is survival, the high level of incongruence between states and the many identities in the region triggers a conflictive political environment. Agreeing that the Middle East should be seen as a penetrated or subordinated system (Brown 1999), Hinnebusch discards Constructivism's non-hierarchical definitions as it detaches itself from a critical view of the core-peripheric global division. Nevertheless, he insists that identities matter, as well as national roles, leadership, intra-elite bureaucratic politics, and public opinion.

Similarly, Gause (2010) argues that systemic anarchy should not be divorced from the ideological map that leaders use to assess their policies. For him, identities and ideas matter because they influence leaders in their decision-making, serving as power tools or sources of threats. He also rebuffs Constructivism because ideas are essential for international relations only when matched with tangible power resources (Gause 2010, p. 12). Leaders, focusing on protecting their regime, perceive hostile domestic or regional activities as more salient than powerful non-regional actors and balance accordingly. In this sense, transnational identities do not flow freely, but they work tied to leaders' will and ability to capitalize on material resources.

For these authors, acknowledging the importance of non-material threats does not negate Realist insights about anarchy and power. Telhami (1992) combines a Neorealist interpretation of alliances with domestic legitimacy to understand Arab coalitions during the Cold War. Harknett and VanDenBerg (1997) investigate Jordan's alignment with Iraq in 1990 as the product of interrelated domestic and foreign threat perceptions. Mitzen (2006) argues that physical and ontological dilemmas prolong the Israel-Palestine conflict. For Salloukh (2004), regional politics should be studied as a series of overlapping contests requiring multiple

⁷ That links with David's 1991 assumption that developing countries omnibalance multilevel threats from systemic, regional, and domestic levels as their state formation is entangled to the global core-peripheral division of power. For him, countries' choices are understood as a product of a constant bargain interaction between the international structure, the regional sub-system, and the domestic society. IRME scholars often employ the concept of omnibalancing.

analytical levels and insights from diverse perspectives. Mabon (2016, p. 23) expands the security dilemma to include an element of regional identitarian incongruity. Similarly, Rubin (2016), examining political Islam's emergence, understands that material, ideological, and ideational threats guide regime survival strategies. In her turn, Darwich (2019) combines the balance of power with ontological security to grasp under which circumstances ideational factors are more relevant to threat perception than material ones. Thus, they all offer different multicausal approaches that view national interests contingent on power and political ethos, institutional apparatus, and leader's beliefs.

Therefore, these works call for a Realist course correction. They emphasize the overbearing effect of the structure while offering different toolsets to investigate the impacts of domestic and transnational factors shaping decisions and perceptions. They agree that concepts such as anarchy, state rationality, and security dilemma are crucial. Simultaneously, they also state that Neorealism alone can not account for the complexity of the region's international politics. Thus, analytical eclecticism has been critical for IRME because it provides essential in-depth analysis with rich explanatory and practical value. However, as a collective, they have made only tentative contributions to IR's progressiveness, maintaining the region still on the periphery of disciplinary theory building and mostly not dialoguing with Global IR. I argue that NCR can pick on the knowledge produced by these analytical eclectics and move forward in the field by doing these two missing movements.

First, most of these works are not the epistemic endeavor of analytical eclecticism proposed by Sil and Katzenstein (2010) but various theoretical combinations that incorporate internal and structural factors ad hoc. While they respond to the call of theoretical pluralism, their value-added to discipline is blurry. A good pluralistic theory should provide explanatory richness, theoretical cumulation, and meta-theoretical discussions. While IRME's eclectics provide compelling explanations, they overall miss the other two. Moreover, a body of literature emerges when we can detect some level of generalizable causal and testing mechanisms (Checkel 2010). They have not formed such a cohesive IR body of literature because they do not offer replicable models beyond the Middle East or, in some cases, even across the countries within the region.

As Reus-Smit (2013) puts it, analytical eclecticism became a catch-all phrase for practical, mixing-and-matching studies aiming to improve knowledge about real-world actors.

That is precisely what most of the IRME's eclectics are doing. However, they did not yet arrive at clear and sustained theoretical progress (Darwich and Kaarbo 2020; Fawcett 2020). Much of the works mentioned above patchwork different theories in isolation, in the sense that each theory explains one part of the analysis. Like that, they risk degeneration (everything can matter) and over-determination (making it impossible to isolate each factor's causal impact). Therefore, a comparative research design becomes mostly inexistent, and there are few possibilities for intellectual cross-fertilization. Moreover, by attaching one theory to another without a cohesive analytical chain, these eclectic works struggle (or avoid) to discuss metaphilosophical foundations and replication paths, weakening the creation of a long-standing research program.

Second, eclecticism can further isolate the Middle East from the discipline. They often select culturally or timely bounded explanative factors, providing ideas that do not travel to other regions. While it is not the case to ditch Middle Eastern particularities, elements such as Islamism and Arabism, for example, could be packed in broader conceptual constructs that travel to regions also marked by religious or ethnic elements. However, most eclectics prefer single-country analysis, and comparisons remain underdeveloped (Darwich 2019, p. 17). As Busse (2018, p. 30) concludes, the question of how to compare the Middle East with other regions remains open. As part of the Global South, the Middle East poses alternative perspectives on the international that can contribute to the discipline's pluralization.⁸ As a region with much of its borders and politics dictated by others, it offers unique insights about nationalism, state, imperialism, regionalism, and alliance-making. Thus, the region's particularities can help Global IR adapt mainstream theories and concepts, making IR genuinely global.

However, IRME's contributions to Global IR are still far from reaching their potential. While the eclectics provided needed selectivity, sophistication, and expertise, they still do not see the Middle East as part of the Global South. By not attempting to create models and arguments that can travel to other regions and instigate comparisons, IRME has so far missed the opportunity to participate in the 'de-Westernization' of IR. A pathway to improve the contribution of IRME to the general state of IR is via a more precise definition of available analytical tools, predictable capability, and methodological rigor. This way, models, theories,

⁸ Here is crucial to stress that I am talking about both what is produced in the Middle East, in MES centers worldwide, and by Middle Easterners, even if they are working from outside the region.

and concepts created by and for the Middle East can travel to other places. The following section argues that NCR, also a pluralist endeavor, is one route for better inserting IRME in the Global IR via a reflexive and transformative dialogue.

3.4 Neoclassical Realism

The previous section disclosed how the Middle East motivates IR scholars to search for a halfway between parsimony and particularism. With that in mind, I employ Neoclassical Realism. In a nutshell, NCR scholars are those that, while keeping core Realist assumptions about the system, have included unit-level variables to explain why states act differently upon similar systemic stimuli (Wohlforth 1993; Christensen 1996; Zakaria 1998; Rose 1998; Sterling-Folker 2009; Kitchen 2010; Reichwein 2012; Foulon 2015). They adhere to the logic that international relations are driven first and foremost by a country's place in the power distribution. However, the anarchical structure is insufficient to explain why and how states deliberate policies. As Layne (2006, p. 8) puts it, structure only tells half of the story. The system creates conditions but does not have complete control over the outcomes. In this sense, NCR is a structural theory that consciously abdicates parsimony for additional explanatory value.

NCR claims unit-level variables channel, mediate, and redirect inputs from the structure, permitting similar states to react differently (Layne 2006, pp. 10–11; Foulon 2015, p. 648). Thus, NCR demands a look inside the states to investigate how they perceive systemic stimuli and mobilize societal resources. In other words, unlike Neorealists, NCR scholars make a case for opening the state's black box. Instead, actors perceive systemic signals, interpret them, and formulate strategies following what they understand as their best interest. In this sense, they use domestic lenses for interpreting structural inputs and elaborating policy outputs. These lenses are intervening variables, the other half of the story.

I argue that its functional paradigmatic boundaries enable bridging MES and IR. That is because NCR stands in the halfway of IR theorizing between systemic determinism and domestic determinism, dodging the extremes of parsimony and particularism (Ripsman et al. 2016, pp. 8–9). This position allows research with similar diagnostic precision and political relevancy to IRME's analytical eclecticism while not losing theoretical replicability and methodological rigor. The following subsections expand this argument, discussing how NCR views the structure as a permissive independent variable and unit-level elements as intervening

variables, justifying how its replicable research agenda has the potential to create a transformative dialogue between area and discipline.

3.4.1 A contextualized structural theory

All Realists agree that the continuous struggle for power determines international politics (Schmidt 2007, p. 43). As a philosophical tradition, what unites Realists is a pessimistic view of the human condition and the prospects for change in human behavior, an idea that can be traced back to Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Clausewitz. Notwithstanding, Classical Realists, Neorealists, and Neoclassical Realists disagree over the power concept and its operationalization. Classical Realists such as Morgenthau and Niebuhr explain power-seeking behavior as inherent in human nature.⁹ Individuals are assumed to be egoistic and with a never-ending ambition for influence and control, being power, consequently, an end in itself (Schmidt 2007, p. 49). Differently, Neorealists claim that explanations for power-seeking behavior are found not in human nature but the anarchical system (Waltz 1979). Neorealists such as Waltz, Mearsheimer, and Gilpin argue that states seek ways to accumulate enough power to guarantee their survival and predominance in the absence of superior authority.

Neorealists locate their independent variable on the system, meaning that anarchy, whether or not by force, drives each state to plot its course to serve its best interests (Waltz 1979, p. 113). In Waltz's (1979, p. 113) words, 'international politics is the realm of power, of struggle and of accommodation.' For this reason, Neorealists argue that it is unnecessary to investigate a state's internal characteristics to explain international relations, as all states eventually are coerced by systemic pressure to behave according to the power distribution. However, Waltz (1979) hardly defines what power is and how to measure it in his work. In general, most Neorealists provide a vague definition of power, sticking with the idea that power is the possession of fungible material resources and emphasizing military capabilities (Rathbun 2008, p. 301; Juneau 2012, p. 36). Authors like Walt (1987) and van Evera (1999) advanced the Neorealist's understanding of power by introducing factors such as aggressive intention, geography proximity, perceptions, and offensive capabilities, arguing that states can have more

⁹ To Niebuhr 1932, every individual has broad survival desires, meaning that their will-to-live eventually becomes the will-to-power. To Morgenthau 1946, objective laws that have their roots in human nature govern politics and society.

interests than survival. Nevertheless, they decline to explore these interests as internally driven or offer more complex power operationalization guidelines.

In their turn, NCR scholars problematize and contextualize power within the structural framework (Rathbun 2008, p. 302). Like Neorealism, NCR understands power as possessing assets or capabilities and as a means to an end. However, they return to the Classic Realists (where the *neoclassical* came from) to claim that power shapes interests and is divisible. Under the Classics work, power is the sum of many factors that concede to a person control or influence over others. They argue that a political actor uses material and immaterial assets to induce international relations in its favor (Schmidt 2007, p. 49). In Niebuhr's works, man could create an endless variety of power combinations (Sandal and James 2011, p. 11). Morgenthau claims that a political actor could use material and immaterial assets to induce changes in its favor, as the quality of diplomacy and leadership are crucial aspects of a nation's power (Morgenthau 1946, 1954). Similarly, many NCR scholars reject conceptualizations of power based on one or a small number of indicators and call for a detailed conceptualization of power that incorporates material and non-material components (Juneau 2015, pp. 35–36).

Thus, NCR explores the many tangible and intangible resources at the state's disposal (Juneau and Schmidt 2012, p. 74; Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 44). Power is grasped as something divisible. This move to fragment power into components brings NCR close to IRME's authors, such as Gause (2010) and Mabon (2016). Middle Eastern countries embody the idea that power has many sources, occasionally intangible ones. Transnational identities (such as Arab, Kurds, Muslim, Shia, and Sunni) act as power resources for leaders to guarantee their security. NCR's contextualization of power prompts the investigation of military and economic assets as well as factors such as the quality of leadership, diplomacy, appeal, and alliances. For example, this step enables discussing de facto powerful states, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which a Neorealist framework would ignore due to their smallness and reduced force size. Frameworks that only assess power via military and economic capabilities also struggle to explain Israel's lack of regional alliances or how Iran often capitalized power on its revolutionary discourse among Muslim masses.

Moreover, the NCR approach also does not assume that all available national resources can be directed to international politics whenever a government sees it fit. NCR discards the idea that the states can automatically mobilize their aggregate power for a more nuanced

understanding of statecraft. Wohlforth (1993) and Schweller (1998) explore the nature of the state unit and how leaders can capitalize on resources for political interests. Internal processes, previous experiences, state institutions, and leadership can affect a state's ability to act consistently (Kitchen 2010, p. 132). Thus, NCR distinguishes between national power and state power, the latter being the power that can be brought to bear to pursue international goals.

For very similar reasons, Halliday (2005), Hinnebusch (2014) and Mabon (2016) stress the need to investigate state formation in Middle East countries. The regional system's permeability, the weakness of many states, the role identity play within the government, and complex intra-elite politics directly interfere in international relations. Hinnebusch (2014, p. 19) is dipping into the NCR's waters when he argues that a state's power position depends on its formation because 'with domestic opposition more manageable, states could mobilize the support and resources to build up their power and, if they wished, pursue external ambitions.' A focus on state formation to explain the international politics of the Middle East is also present in approaches that follow Halliday's (2005) historical sociology framework.

Furthermore, NCR is aware that individuals compose the state and, for that reason, state power and the interpretation of systemic inputs depend on human error (Meibauer 2020). They introduce the concepts of clarity and environment permissiveness to grasp how states *perceive* systemic inputs (both the constraints and opportunities). Due to anarchy's indeterminacy, information is not always clear or available. The systemic signals can have low or high clarity, and it is up to leaders' interpretation of how permissive or restrictive the systemic environment is (Lobell et al. 2009b, p. 51). Hence, states react to their *perception* of what is going on in the system, frequently translating inputs with bias, ambiguity, or delay (Rathbun 2008, p. 152; Meibauer 2020, p. 14). So, the system's anarchical condition is a permissive factor conveying opportunities and threats rather than the sole causal force of international politics.

Both clarity and permissiveness allude to how states recognize opportunities and threats from the system differently, permitting the introduction of unit-level variables to understand policymaking. In a nutshell, NCR keeps the anarchical tenet intact while expanding its power interpretation and how systemic signals are transmitted to the state before policies are made. Rather than discussing if states accumulate power for defense or offense maximization, NCR proposes that states are influence maximizers, meaning that the more they perceive their power increased, the more control over the environment they will want (Rose 1998, p. 151). Hence,

NCR creates space for discussing different motivations in international relations. To explain these different motivations, the approach justifies opening the states' black box without disrupting Realism's metaphorical foundations.

The idea of states being influence maximizers means that the more they perceive their power increased, the more control over the environment they will want. That is possible because NCR separates state power from the totality of the accumulated resources and relates it to domestic factors that manipulate the resources' capitalization. Some critics argue that the idea that states can have various motivations makes NCR a degenerative approach, as Neorealism does not functionally differentiate states (Narizny 2017). However, Neorealism does not say states are equal, but anarchy pressures them to perform similar survival functions. For Neorealists, states can be seen as alike because the pressure of seeking survival and security drives them to perform similarly (Fiammenghi et al. 2018). Conversely, NCR stipulates that, in conditions of a permissive environment (where security is less endangered), actors can have the 'luxury' of seeking more goals beyond security. Understanding that states can have more preferences when the environment is permissive does not make NCR a degenerative approach because that is grounded on perception.

The concepts of state power and environment perception are most useful for the Middle East. IRME analytical eclectics have insisted on understanding how leaders perceive threats within the system (Gause 2003; Rubin 2016; Darwich 2019). Transnational identities, ideological projects, and regional influence are often sources of intangible power. States react to how threatening they feel within the system, which depends not only on military forces but also on ideologies, competitive identities, and tribal conundrums (Rubin 2016; Darwich 2019). Moreover, the power distribution is only a condition rather than the cause of international relations. In this sense, when Gause (2010, p. 19) says that structure constrains Middle Eastern players' causes but does not dictate specific policy choices, he essentially states NCR's tenets.

3.4.2 The systematic inclusion of internal factors

Unlike Neorealism, NCR adds internal factors in its explanative chain as intervening variables. These variables do not cause international politics but twist, shape, and tilt political outcomes. The principle is that states receive systemic inputs, and intervening variables filter these signals to create meaning for policymaking. NCR scholars add these elements not because they understand reality as socially constructed but because the states fall back on perception to

comprehend reality (Rathbun 2008, p. 315). Therefore, these factors receive the second position in the analytical chain, as policies cannot transcend the systemic structure's limits (Rose 1998, p. 153). Ideas, perceptions, and ideologies remain anchored in individual action, helping decision-makers detect interests amidst uncertainty (Meibauer 2020, p. 11).

Gause (2010, p. 12) argued that transnational ideas and identities in the Middle East matter only at their intersection with material factors because they affect leaders' perceptions and provide tools to act. After all, flesh and blood officials make politics (Christensen 1996). Thus, it is misleading to think that they always respond to systemic stimuli the same way, even when there is plenty of information. Some NCR authors understand that actors have a qualified or bounded rationality that affects their environment perception and which policies can be taken (Juneau 2015, p. 31; Meibauer 2020, p. 6). Even when leaders correctly perceive threats and incentives, they can follow suboptimal decision processes that lead to policy responses at odds with systemic imperatives (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 23). That does not mean, however, that actors are irrational. On the contrary, they act on the bounds of the most rational choice after making assessments shaped by their observations and understanding of reality.

Intervening variables explain how some outcomes are discarded during decision-making, and others are preferred. It allows the investigation of motivations, political elites' interests, regime endurance, multinational identities, or leadership preferences. Thus, they permit research that includes the particularities that the IRME scholars argue to be crucial. For example, ideational factors are essential to grasp why revisionist actors, such as Iran and Hezbollah, continue uncompromising behaviors despite systemic punishment. They also explain why GCC countries aligned with Iraq against Iran in the 1980s, despite Iraq being the most prominent military threat. Similarly, it is impractical to explain the 1950's Arab Cold War without discussing anti-imperialist beliefs, Arabism, and local leadership.

To sum up, NCR prioritizes the political environment in which the states interact in combination with unit-level variables that shape outcomes. Domestic factors receive a second place analytically, as a state's international politics cannot transcend the systemic limitations (Rose 1998, p. 153). Ideas, perceptions, norms, and ideologies remain anchored in individual action, meaning that they matter as assisting the decision-maker in identifying interests amidst uncertainty (Meibauer 2020, p. 11). Unlike Constructivism, the focus is not on the social impact of ideas or interpretative puzzles about reality. Ideational and cognitive variables serve to fill

the gap between systemic stimuli and concrete policies. They matter because they handle practical problems related to the perception, interpretation, and translation of the structural constraints (Dueck 2006; Onea 2012; Meibauer 2020).

In other words, NCR predefines a hierarchical arrangement of variables (Juneau 2015, p. 25). On its explanative chain, unit-level variables are sub-sequential to systemic-level variables. Agency is possible within a structurally determined perimeter of options that power defines. In this sense, NCR aims toward analytical synthesis, combining and mediating diverse variables into a single explanation (Onea 2021, p. 10). An efficient NCR work needs to present a predefined hierarchical arrangement of variables, identifying specific conditions under which domestic politics matters. Intervening variables fill the gap between systemic stimuli and concrete policies. In other words, they matter because they handle practical problems related to the perception, interpretation, and translation of the structural constraints (Dueck 2006; Meibauer 2020). This acquiescence of internal factors into the analysis as influencing the decision-making avoids overdetermination because it fits into a straightforward, predefined research design.

These variables allow the researcher to narrow the band of policy options available (Juneau 2015). Each variable works as a filter, adding further specificity to the range of feasible policies. Nevertheless, intervening variable selection is a point that many critics pick on (Vasquez 1997; Sears 2017; Narizny 2017; Smith 2018). To Sears (2017, p. 28), NCR can become degenerative in Lakatosian terms due to the proliferation of a considerably large set of intervening variables without a concise theoretical statement. Both Vasquez (1997) and Legro and Moravcsik (1999) question the theory's falsifiability because it denotes an *ad hoc* method of electing variables. Indeed, NCR did not emerge from a single work like some other programs. Therefore, the choices and justifications of intervening variables had fluctuated roughly, with authors exploring a comprehensive range of factors to explain their cases.

At first glance, NCR suffers similar criticism as analytical eclecticism: risking degeneration. It is undeniable that there are works that call themselves NCR but are, in fact, only mixing and matching elements without designating a predefined place within their explanation. However, to be an NCR work, an analysis needs to avoid this patchwork tendency and develop a consistent, compartmentalized model in which the independent variable is the system, and unit-level factors are intervening variables. Thus, these intervening variables'

selection will depend on the case. According to Foulon and Meibauer (2021, p. 16), NCR scholars must carefully justify and conceptualize their variable selection to avoid regressive theorizing. However, despite what critics may assume, an ‘open menu’ of available variables is a potential strength of NCR concerning more rigorous theories, as it enables much-needed pluralism, contextualization, and interdisciplinary dialogue.

The NCR’s added value to IRME is enabling creative research designs that dialogue with other disciplinary fields to seek context-specific insights for the intervening variables. NCR can embrace different works touching Realist themes due to its rather loose paradigmatic boundaries, broadening the intellectual canon itself (Foulon and Meibauer 2021, p. 16). By applying NCR to Middle Eastern international politics, one can build upon the in-depth and complex analysis while rearranging the explanative chain and advancing IRME further. Juneau (2015) detects at least four types of intervening variables: ideas, individuals, interests, and identities. Ripsman et al. (2016, pp. 61–79) present four similar clusters: leaders’ images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. These lists, however, are not exhaustive, and the selection of the intervening variables will depend on dialoguing with specialized literature concerning the selected case. In conclusion, to decide which domestic factors matter to the analytical chain, an a priori investigation based on empirical grounds is necessary (Rathbun 2008, p. 297; Lobell et al. 2009b, p. 117).

3.4.3 The NCR’s possible transformative agenda

One may argue that I propose a continuation of the hierarchical dialogue between Area Studies and IR, in which the first is a ‘gas station’ providing empirical fuel for NCR analysis. However, the dialogue is fundamentally reflexive. NCR is in itself a rethinking and reevaluation of the universalistic concepts of Realism. As Sterling-Folker (2021, p. 22) puts it, NCR is not a single perspective but an analytical umbrella with an interactive and emergent theorizing style. The ongoing debate among NCR scholars is about what can Realism do and how? Some argue that NCR aims to prioritize midrange theorizing and empirical puzzles, explaining foreign policy (Rathbun 2008; Juneau 2015) or grand strategy (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006). Others state that NCR offers a theory of international relations (Ripsman et al. 2016; Kitchen 2021).

Despite this diversity, Neoclassical Realists share research interests, methodologies, and interpretations of reality that assemble them all into a scholarly community (Meibauer 2021, p. 3). With the growing trend of critically reevaluating IR canons and pinpointing their Western

parochialisms, Realism rightfully accumulates criticism for avoiding contextualizing its concepts and marginalizing thinking from outside the West (Chakrabarty 2000; Schmidt 2014). This thesis subscribes to Foulon and Meibauer's (2020) proposition that NCR must interact with non-Western thought and learn how to expand its explanative value, improving its relevance within the discipline. In other words, it must embrace its plurality and diversity, expanding the Realist paradigm's scope and topics. For that, the dialogue between NC and the already produced IRME here proposed must be a two-way conversation between peers, making both tighter to the Global IR movement.

NCR is far from being a Global IR endeavor in its origins. Instead, it came to be predominantly a Western theory, focusing on great power politics and events in Europe, the United States, or the Soviet Union (Schweller 1998; Layne 2006; Dueck 2006). Foulon and Meibauer (2020) mapped NCR's temporal and geographical distribution, confirming that most scholars and cases are still from the United States or Europe. However, that does not mean NCR has little relevance in explaining the behavior of non-Western cases. Ripsman et al. (2016, p. 182) suggest that NCR needs to expand its scope, range, and cases beyond the West, as the strength of some intervening variables, such as strategic culture or a leader's experience, can be even more salient and complex outside the great power's grid.

Global IR aims to subsume and constantly readapt all IR theories instead of supplementing them (Buzan and Acharya 2019, p. 301). As the IRME's review showed, many Realist assumptions, despite their Western origins, are crucial for explaining local politics. Concepts have traveled and adapted. By producing frameworks that reconnect these traveled concepts, NCR can recalibrate Realism's paradigmatic boundaries, bringing it closer to Global IR's tenets. This exercise would make the Realist school more in touch with non-Western reality. By opening space to question the immaterial and material elements that influence, coerce, and motivate actors in different places and conjunctures, NCR can overcome the Realist tendency to marginalize non-Western ideas and cases.

To Foulon and Meibauer (2020), NCR permits hybrid interpretations of reality, expanding Realism's analytical horizons and contributing to the development of genuinely global questions, concepts, and perspectives. It provides a two-level theorization and emphasizes state-level factors, something that is crucial for IRME. The dialogue can also transform IRME by questioning how much its concepts and frameworks can travel to other

Global South contexts. A genuinely Global IR venture should make space for local particularities to be integrated into its analytical model. By clustering variables into more general statements, NCR allows us to think about connectivity between regions, make cross-comparisons, and evaluate the ‘tradeable goods’ coming from the Middle East and its scholars.

Middle Eastern cases seem to be gaining relevance in NCR studies, with a slow but steady growing number of books, thesis, and articles published yearly. For example, NCR was employed to explain extra-regional behavior in the region (Miller 2010; İşeri and Dilek 2011; Marsh 2014; Boke 2016), intra-regional relations (Salloukh 2015; Darwich 2017; Belcastro 2020), and foreign policy of countries such as Iran (Juneau 2015), Turkey (Şahin 2020; Gülmez 2020), and Syria (Dersan 2012). Most of these works do not necessarily frame themselves within the Global IR initiative nor propose comparisons with other regions. Nonetheless, they offer a much clearer path for such comparisons to happen than analytical eclecticism ever did.

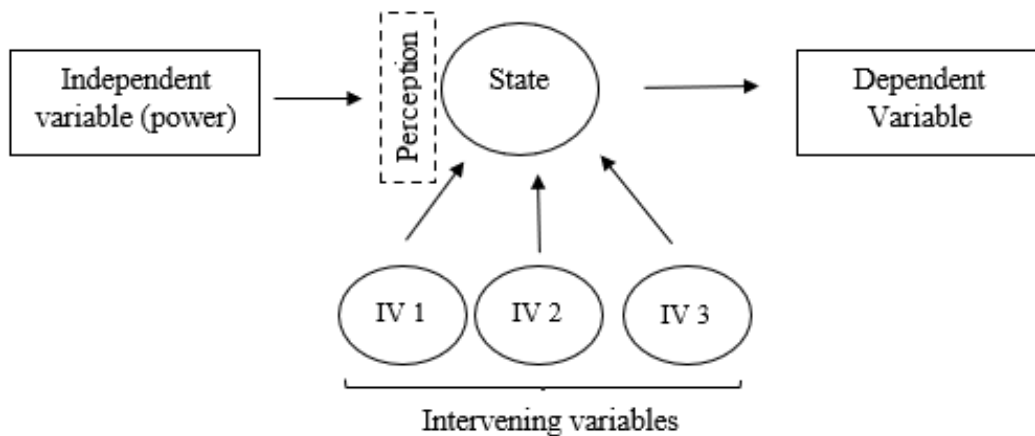
In conclusion, the NCR bridges the spatial, cognitive, and temporal divides in IR theory (Foulon 2015, p. 636). I argue that the possibility of adding internal elements into the analytical chain is promising for overcoming the barriers separating IRME scholars from mainstream IR and Realism from Global IR. It enhances explanation and improves the quality of the intellectual exchange. Hence, the Middle East is a promising land for constructing Global IR-oriented Neoclassical Realism. The following subsection discusses how the research design can contribute to this endeavor by elaborating replicable and comparable frameworks.

3.4.4 A replicable research design

The NCR value-added to IR is to reinvigorate the Realist research program by consciously reducing its parsimony and increasing its explanatory value. It does that while avoiding degeneration because it properly identifies the conditions for the analysis and provides a complex yet hierarchical analytical framework: the independent variable is power, whereas unit-level factors are intervening variables. The first generation of NCR scholars argued that the dependent variable was a country’s foreign policy change and how similar states choose different policies after a similar systemic input. Following discussions concluded that foreign policy was one type of dependent variable (NCR type I). According to the definition from Ripsman et al. (2016), NCR can also explain grand strategies (NCR type II) and long-term systemic outcomes (NCR type III).

NCR has a common nature of quest: developing theories that thoroughly consider domestic and systemic factors to explain IR topics (Rathbun 2008, p. 299). It builds common threads of arguments and advances on previous studies about power by adding unit-level variables as rigorously as possible. Image three shows how unit-level variables are sub-sequential to the systemic variable. Perceptions remind us that the unit-level works as supporting assessing the environment, reducing or increasing clarity. In other words, the agency is possible within a structurally determined perimeter of options that power defines.

Image three: NCR causal chain



Author's elaboration

This way, I argue that NCR can overcome IRME's excessive particularism problems pinpointed earlier, as regional characteristics are contained in a specific position in the analysis. Moreover, by inserting regional-specific factors, such as Arabism or Islamism, as intervening instead of independent, it is possible to make cross-comparisons and steadily remove the region from the periphery of theory-building. Contrariwise, if these factors are kept at an independent variable, the region will continue to be neglected by the IR mainstream.

Critiques say that NCR exposes itself to paradigmatic indistinctiveness by including assumptions from other schools of thought (Legro and Moravcsik 1999). In their understanding, NCR stretches Realism so much that it sacrifices its meaning, becoming indistinguishable from other non-Realist theories. Moreover, Sears (2017) and Smith (2018) question whether NCR is a progressive Realist research program because it does not present a parsimonious statement of how states and systems interact. These critics indicate a narrow understanding of the Realist thought's core assumptions, which are broad and not defined by its chosen variables.

Furthermore, there was never one Realism but *Realisms*. To Walt (1997) and Schweller (2003), Realism has many shapes and forms, and it does not need to have one and only core to keep its progressiveness. Additionally, the idea that scientific progress is only reachable through scholarly settlement is contestable in itself, notably because it ignores that practice and dialogue create theory (Meibauer 2021; Sterling-Folker 2021).

Moreover, the skepticism towards NCR's 'appropriation' of variables from other theoretical paradigms is also shaky because it perpetuates the logic that specific paradigms hold the status of certain variables' gatekeepers. All IR paradigms have access to virtually all available variables (Sterling-Folker 1997; Meibauer 2020). What makes a difference is why and how each paradigm operationalizes a variable. Nothing in Realism forbids *a priori* the employment of one type or another of a variable. Even some of the most relentless critics of NCR agree that no Realist's core assumption forbids unit-level elements (Narizny 2017, p. 161). Why and how each paradigm operationalizes a variable under its logic makes a difference. As long as the unit-level variables are integrated hierarchically into the explanative chain via individual action, NCR sustains its metaphilosophical groundings.

NCR subscribes to a soft positivist ontology and epistemology, meaning that it seeks an objective truth while being aware of scientific research's limitations (Ripsman et al. 2016; Meibauer 2020). International Relations is, after all, a Social Sciences discipline: no single event can be reproduced for controlled empiricist conclusions (Meibauer 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, NCR recognizes the shortcomings of theory testing, such as subjectivity, interpretation, unpredictability, and ethical requirements, and maintains a healthy degree of skepticism towards findings (Lobell et al. 2009b, p. 106). Thus, soft positivism does not agree with hard positivists that natural sciences methods can be used identically in Social Sciences, nor that universal truths about the social world can be captured with inductive-statistical methods.

Methodologically, NCR emphasizes theoretically informed narratives that trace how power is translated into actual decisions while retaining significant abstraction and some parsimony (Rose 1998, p. 168). NCR searches for partial, context-bounded generalizations across objects and tests them via case-study analysis. Moreover, it assumes it is impossible to reach conclusive proofs – only confirm or disconfirm evidence and build additional knowledge. Thus, in most cases, process tracing followed by case studies is the NCR chosen methodological

framework (Salloukh 2004; Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Juneau 2015). These case studies demand theoretically informed narratives and much historical evidence by default.

Case study narratives allow the researcher to evaluate the ‘causal links that connect explanatory variables with predicted outcomes and to see whether policymakers speak, write and otherwise behave in a manner consistent with the theory's predictions’ (Layne 2006, p. 11). According to Wohlforth (1994) and Schweller (1998), historical narratives are the way to ground these analyses empirically and produce progressive research. These historical narratives are also mostly found in regional studies, which produce specialized, in-depth analyses of specific cases. This way, the argumentation here makes a full circle: NCR’s methodology promotes interdisciplinary dialogue with Area Studies as a pathway for pluralistic frameworks that consciously abandon parsimony for more explanation, being more in sync with Global IR.

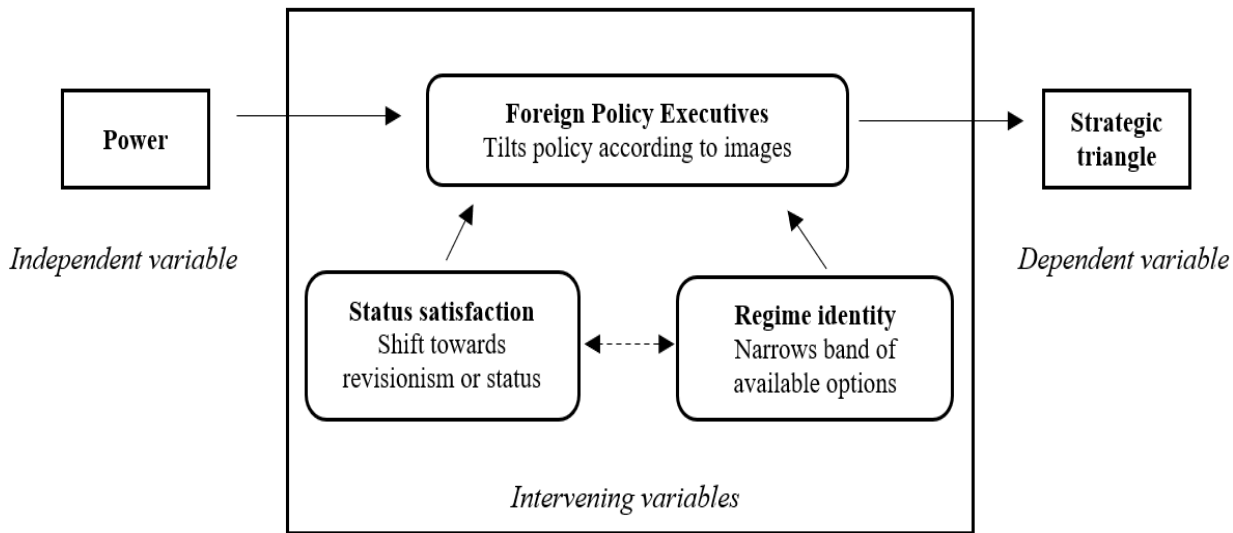
3.5 The NRC model for the US-Iran-Saudi relations

This chapter’s final part presents the thesis’s analytical instrument. As discussed, power is the chief determinant of international relations in NCR as capabilities, in the long-term, shape intentions (Juneau 2015, p. 20). Each intervening variable should further specify the range of feasible policies by explaining a particular aspect of the decision-making process. However, in practice, the intervening variables' content can overlap as they are, after all, social variables from the same subject, the state (Juneau 2015, p. 26). Overlapping is not problematic as long as each variable's effect on the explanative chain is straightforward. Politics are, in the end, human-made. Therefore, it becomes impossible to separate cognitive, ideational, and social factors entirely and observe them in isolation. However, this should not discourage the search for a certain level of standardization and categorization.

I scrutinize the thesis’s explanative chain in the following subsections and unpack key concepts. The explanative chain I develop goes: *power* (independent variable), *status satisfaction*, *regime identity*, *foreign policy executives* (the three intervening variables), and the *strategic triangle* (dependent variable). The intervening variables selection is according to the previous chapter's findings: the literature review highlighted ideational, cognitive, and leadership categories influencing the three dyads. Thus, status satisfaction is the ideational variable, *shifting* the strategy parameters towards revisionism or continuity; regime identity is the cognitive variable, *narrowing* the band of possible action, and foreign policy executives concern leader’s agency, *tilting* the outcomes in the direction of their preferences, interests, and

interpretations. Finally, the dependable variable is the strategic triangle, which includes the region's three countries' grand strategies.

Image four: the explanative chain



Author's elaboration

I work with the idea that systemic events can shift the distribution of power within the regional system (*structural changes*), provoking a new set of constraints and opportunities (*inputs*) and affecting the results (*outputs: strategic triangle*). Intervening variables receive these systemic inputs, narrowing the grand strategy options within the triangle. For example, a country receives a systemic input X. The status satisfaction shifts feasible options towards revisionism or continuity, while the regime identity filters these options according to cognitive biases, offering the FPE possible policies A, B, or C. The FPE's preferences explain how and why a country chooses policy B and not A or C.

The intervening variables count for the ones *doing* policy, how they perceive information and identify available options (Wohlforth 1993). Hence, outcomes are ultimately bounded to the FPE – how they perceive environment restrictiveness, interpret cognitive functions, and calculate risks and opportunities. That is why the first two intervening variables – status satisfaction and regime identity – are at the same level in image four, whereas the FPE is on top. It is also important to stress that identities can have an ideational character, meaning that it is invariable to separate identity from status entirely. For this reason, there is a dotted arrow between both variables, indicating their interconnection. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify their function in the analytical chain. While status satisfaction tilts options towards revisionism or

status quo, regime identity filters out policies that do not follow any cognitive lenses. The following subsections examine in-depth each of the elements of the explanative chain.

3.5.1 The independent variable: power in context

In NCR, power is dynamic, contingent, multidimensional, and mostly non-fungible. As the independent variable, it has an enabling effect in the explanative chain. A change in power distribution ignites grand strategy reassessment or rearrangement. To consider the US', Saudi Arabia's, and Iran's power during a particular period, I take on Morgenthau's (1954) two types of broader elements of power. In his definition, there are, on the one hand, elements with a *stable nature* that are quantitative, such as geography, natural resources, military capability, and demography. On the other hand, there are elements with a *changeable nature* that are qualitative, referring to non-material features such as national morale, quality of government, influence, leadership, and diplomacy. This division gives more historicization and context to the resources that a state can capitalize on for political interests. While the military is the most imposing component of power, it cannot be equated to the totality of a state's power.

Stable power consists of geographical and demographical assets, economic capabilities, government stability, and military capacities. First, geography can dictate access to opportunities or constraints, especially regarding its location. Geographical location can determine if a country is political or economically strategic or isolated. Additionally, border delimitations relate directly to security: whether a country is naturally protected, has access to the sea, or is involved in territorial conflicts. Moreover, geography is relevant for power when it comes to size and access to resources, particularly in cases where a country lies over profitable or strategic resources (like oil or diamonds) or, on the contrary, lacks essential resources such as water or energy. Juneau (2015, p. 27) stresses that geography also matters in relative terms, meaning that a country's capacities depend not only on its geography but also on the geography of other states. For example, a country can be surrounded by enemies, continuously threatened by neighbors or, on the contrary, find strong local alliances that improve environmental security.

Demography relates to a country's potential to be defined as a great, regional, or small power, as a significant population is necessary for ever-growing economic and military demands (Morgenthau 1954). Populational growth, demographic distribution, age pyramids, and urbanization indicate important parameters for delimitating how powerful a country can be in absolute terms and in comparison to other competitors (Nolte 2010, p. 881). Conversely, low-

rate growth, a quickly aging population, or unequal demographic distribution limit a country's ability to reach larger ambitions. Particularly in periods of war or prolonged attrition with other countries, a reduced population directly disrupts a country's amount of displaceable military personnel and its capability to protect borders and impose defense.

Similarly, economic strength matters mainly as an enabler of other power components (Juneau 2015, p. 39). Considering the dominance of the capitalist economy, a country's relative economic weight has a crucial impact on its capabilities of exercising regional control or leadership (Nolte 2010, p. 882). Impoverished countries cannot guarantee the constant modernization of their defense and industrial apparatus. They are also susceptible to protests, political instabilities, and acute social-economic crises that hamper the country's ability to accumulate resources. Moreover, economic mismanagement, corruption, and unemployment can make a state vulnerable to political contestation and strong opposition (Juneau 2015, p. 40).

Finally, the cruciality of military capabilities is undeniable in defining how powerful a country is. Military force serves as the *ultima ratio* and the first and constant source of international politics (Waltz 1979, p. 113). That comes first and foremost due to the Realist worldview that actors cannot be sure about others' intentions, and the possibility of war always lingers (Sandal and James 2011, p. 11). In a scenario of insecurity and lack of information, states often find themselves in security dilemmas, which enforce general militarization for offensive or defensive reasons. From a broader perspective, these forces can be conventional or asymmetrical, organized for defense, deterrence, or offensive aims. A country with enough military capabilities can impose its will by coercion, deployment threat, or precise operations. A relatively high defense budget and an adequate ratio between the reserve and regular troops allow for greater political and securitarian exertion. While quantity is crucial, quality is also paramount, as well as policy, doctrine, organization, and training. Finally, strong defense industry and training capability is essential for reducing dependency on suppliers, shorting up budget costs, and creating self-sufficiency (Juneau 2015, p. 39)

When it comes to the *changeable* elements of power, I explore what some authors had called the external source of power, meaning the alliances, diplomatic ties, political reputation, and regional appeal (Sobek and Clare 2013, p. 470). Classics Realists like Morgenthau and Carr state that countries have intangible resources that improve their ability to shape others' opinions or preferences (Schmidt 2007, p. 50). These elements can vary from one day to another, mainly

depending on the political environment, therefore changeable. For example, a political change in a country can provoke an immediate alteration of its sets of alliances, international legitimacy, or regional appeal.

Alliances and long-standing partnerships are efficient means a state can use to combine resources with like-minded countries and boost their interests (Juneau 2015, p. 40). Also, alliances and membership to securitarian coalitions such as NATO or the GCC can provide deterrence capabilities and security backing, especially if they are durable and reliable (Sobek and Clare 2013, p. 470). It is undeniable that a country is more protected if it has more friends than enemies and if these friends collaborate in economic or securitarian terms. In a nutshell, the more positive relations a country has, the more leverage it has for pursuing its goals (Juneau 2015, p. 40). Nevertheless, it is often essential to understand also the nature of the alliance and its reliability concerning counter alliances (Walt 1987). Nevertheless, in a general statement, alliances and partnerships provide political and diplomatic support, international legitimacy, strategic depth, and bargaining authority.

Morgenthau (1954, pp. 129–130) gives special attention to diplomatic skills in his understanding of power, as ‘the conduct of a nation’s foreign affairs by its diplomats is for national power in peace what military strategy and tactics by its military leaders are for national power in war.’ I assess the infrastructure available for diplomacy within the region as part of the independent variable, questioning the number of embassies a country has and its participation in international conferences and meetings. Moreover, I evaluate a country’s political reputation in broader terms, exploring international prestige and status events, such as hosting high-ranking meetings, frequency of diplomatic visits, participation in summits, and the signature of international deals. These aspects consider how isolated or integrated into the regional system a country is.

Finally, it is crucial to stress that actors can gather changeable power by sharing identitarian or religious affiliations with transnational communities. The battle for hearts and minds in the Persian Gulf via transnational identities was already discussed in the previous chapter. The way that states play with regional appeal and popularity in other nations to increase power has been frequently associated with the concept of soft power (Nye 2003). However, soft power is a relational element, diverging from the NCR’s elements-of-power approach (Juneau and Schmidt 2012, p. 62). Thus, in this model, I investigate regional appeal as the power of

influencing others regionally via sharing links and ties with state and non-state actors. The regional appeal is a way to explore how much a country's values and political model are rejected or accepted by others in the region (Juneau 2015, p. 41).

As I presented in the methodological section in the introduction, I assess these power elements for the three actors in each empirical chapter. This analysis is done for the entire period (1969 to 1979; 1980 to 1990; 1990 to 2003; and 2003 to 2014), demonstrating how power is dynamic, contextual, and mostly non-fungible. I first present the systemic event that disturbed the regional balance of power in each chapter. Afterward, I present the countries' stable and changeable power throughout the selected period. For that, I combine quantitative and qualitative data. Finally, before delving into the intervening variables, I contextualize these three powers within the Persian Gulf balance of power, introducing other key actors' power when necessary.

3.5.2 *First intervening variable: status satisfaction*

The first intervening variable is *ideational*, referring to states' ideas about their expected position in the international system. It is necessary first to define status to discuss the status satisfaction behavior. The international system is anarchical in the sense that there is no superior authority beyond the states. However, power is unequally distributed. Due to the international division of labor, countries are divided into core and periphery, restricting who has access to what (Halliday 1994). Thus, inequality is an underlying condition under which politics operate (Volgy et al. 2011b, p. 1). When it comes to power distribution, some countries have the status of a superpower, a middle power, a weak state, or even a failed one (Holsti 1996). Thus, status here is assumed to be the ranking the states have on this unequal distribution of power.¹⁰

Status is positional, social, and subjective (Renshon 2017, p. 4). First, it is positional because it informs a standing in a rank that is relative and socially scarce. Not all actors can enjoy the benefits of having high status; if everybody had the same status, there would be no inequality. This position can change due to alterations in the country (it can get more or less

¹⁰ It is important to recognise that there are many different types of status on the literature, which are explored extensively by the status literature (Renshon 2017; Paul et al. 2014b; Prosser 2017). In this thesis, I explore status concerning power distribution. Nevertheless, I do not ignore that status can be related to other factors or international phenomena, depending on the status community that the author chose to explore. For example, a country can be seeking status concerning gender equality, environmental protection, e-government technological advances, among others.

powerful) or changes in others' status holders (somebody can get more or less powerful, pushing a revision of the overall ranking). Therefore, the position is always relative, not representing an absolute number. Second, status is social because it refers to high-order perceptions about a state's relative ranking and cannot be attained unilaterally (Paul et al. 2014b, p. 8). There is no self-fulfilling status: for a country to have status, it needs to get recognition. The recognition is via status markers, such as membership in global assemblies, alliances, leadership positions in international operations, host global events, and diplomatic proactivity. Finally, status is subjective as it cannot be quantified or empirically tested. It depends on others' collective perceptions about the power distribution in a particular order – international or regional (Renshon 2017: 4).

However, status is not a domestic factor precisely because it is positional, social, and collectively subjective. Therefore, one cannot discuss status as an intervening variable in NCR, as it is not in the unit-level analysis. For this reason, this thesis focuses on a state's assessment of its perceived status, examining how satisfied it is with its current ranking. A state's estimation of its status is based on its interpretation of how others see itself, a judgment that may leave it either satisfied or dissatisfied (Paul et al. 2014b, p. 8). That means that states make policies attentive to their (and others) relative position (Paul et al. 2014b, p. 7; Prosser 2017, p. 28). Among Realists, Morgenthau (1954), Schweller (2004), and Juneau (2015) explore states' attitudes towards their perception of their position in the systemic order, evaluating whether they are satisfied with this position or not. Being a revisionist or a status quo actor is a product of such perception and orients foreign policy preferences. Thus, status satisfaction is an ideational category of intervening variables referring to perceptual biases about a position that can push a country towards accommodation or nonconformity goals.

In sum, status satisfaction is operationalized as to how the country perceives the status others ascribe to it and how much it corresponds to the one it believes it deserves. Renshon (2017, p. 26) argues that an efficient way to understand how a state is satisfied or not with its status is via how it behaves concerning others' positions. States sort themselves into peer competition groups (great powers, middle powers, regional powers, among others), and their satisfaction depends on other states supporting or denying their ambitions. The ranking is not about having or not having, but how much one has concerning the other peer competitors

(Renshon 2017). States will be discontent with their status when they perceive that they are being ascribed to a lower status than they think they deserve (Juneau 2015).

As already discussed, I work with the Persian Gulf as a regional system, and I investigate the US's, Iran's, and Saudi Arabia's ambitions toward this system. Status satisfaction as an intervening variable shows a country's regional ambitions and how it thinks the system should work. The state's ambitions (*status aspiration*) can match or not with what it perceives as the position others prescribe for it (*status ascription*). The relationship between aspiration and ascription provides two scenarios: first, when there is congruence between ascribed and aspiration, a state is satisfied with the status quo; second, when the ascribed status is lesser than the aspirations, the state is dissatisfied with the order, being revisionist (Juneau 2015, p. 43). Thus, this intervening variable highlights policy orientations, revealing whether a country finds the current system legitimate or the power distribution fair. In conclusion, in this thesis's explanative chain, status satisfaction shifts the grand strategy towards revisionism or conservation of the regional order. While a revisionist actor disagrees with the existing structure or finds the interstate relations illegitimate, a status quo actor defends the maintenance of the power distribution and political order.

3.5.3 *Second intervening variable: regime identity*

Status satisfaction indicates a country's grand strategy orientation but does not explain its chosen policies (Juneau 2012, p. 21). For that reason, my model includes regime identity as the cognitive variable that further specifies the explanative chain. In general, identity gives a sense of what an actor believes it is supposed or not to be – it provides ontological distinction. Many NCR authors recognize the benefits of introducing cognitive biases to improve their frameworks' explanatory value (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Sterling-Folker 2009; Juneau 2015). Because Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States have quite different political ruling systems (an Islamist republic, a theocratic monarchy, and a bipartisan federal democracy), I look into the identity of the political regimes – the elite group that defines and constitutes the state action. In my model, regime identities work as identitarian constructs that provide lenses from which policymakers can interpret the country's cognitive function. Therefore, its effect in the explanatory chain is to exclude some grand strategy options to avoid ontological distress.

In the most common use of the term, identity is the state of being like something and different from another thing in a particular circumstance (Chafetz et al. 1998, p. 8; Barnett

1998). Identity is a relational concept that involves creating boundaries that separate what you are and what others are that you are not. That means that for an understanding of a *self* to exist, it is necessary to have a differentiation relating to an *other*. In politics, identity draws a sharp line that gives one a sense of uniqueness in facing others it is interacting (Telhami and Barnett 2002; Rubin 2017). Thus, just like we have a notion of what we are and are not, I assume that regimes have self-conceptions reflecting patterns of political affiliation, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, making them ontologically distinctive from one another (Chafetz et al. 1998, p. 9; Darwich 2014, p. 5). These identities work as mental constructs to facilitate the processing of information based on previously acquired knowledge, experiences, and beliefs.

To sum up, identities are cognitive constructs that provide self-schemas, which organize an otherwise overwhelming amount of daily incoming information into assessable content (Chafetz et al. 1998, p. 9). According to Giddens (1991, p. 36), actors are aware that, in anarchical contexts, chaos lurks, and this constant awareness provokes anxiety, making it hard to reconcile competing threats and take action. Mitzen (2006, p. 342) states that any agency requires a stable cognitive environment. Otherwise, an actor cannot systematically relate ends to means in an environment where she has no idea what to expect. Thus, these self-schemas work as a way to reduce uncertainty subjectively (Giddens 1991, p. 39). They consist of the mental representations one has about what it stands for, overcoming short-term memory deficits and other processes of storing information (Juneau 2015, p. 45). Consequently, it helps actors cope with complex situations, making life more predictable (Chafetz et al. 1998, p. 10).

For Sterling-Folker (2009, p. 103), the act of grouping actors by what they are justifies the use of identity as an NCR intervening variable. She points out that tribalism, a foundational tenant of the Realist ontology, is nothing more than the process of creating collective identities that distinguish in-groups from out-groups. Tribalism and conflictual group fragmentation are immutable aspects of political life as ‘human beings cannot survive in an anarchical environment as individuals, but only as members of a larger group’ (Lobell et al. 2009b, p. 14). For that reason, NCR scholars can incorporate insights regarding the process of collective identity formation without necessarily producing degenerative theorization (Sterling-Folker 1997, p. 109). For Mitzen (2006, p. 343), the employment of identity on a Realist model is valid because cognitive biases are inarticulate dispositions that precede and inform decision-making.

Thus, exploring these cognitive elements is consistent with rational agency and can explain apparent irrational behaviors in international politics.

Identity is, however, a broad and amorphous concept to be added to the NCR explanative chain, considering that one can be talking about the identity of specific individuals, different nationalities, and groups within elite groups. That is why I narrow this intervening variable to regime identity, keeping the term ‘regime’ as far as possible from everyday negative connotations. According to Darwich (2019, p. 29), a regime comprises formal organizations at the center of the political power, representing a complex organization related to the political elite. Juneau (2015) employs regime identity in his NCR model to consider how a regime interprets the world and its role. This variable denotes the historical, cultural, and normative narratives promoted by the elite in power and transmitted through the government, representing their idea of *what their country should be*.

Regime identities are thus the product of their socialization, meaning that material, social, historical, and cultural events construct them (Aggastam 2006, p. 15). They are, therefore, usually durable and resistant to change, which does not mean that changes cannot occur (Chafetz, Spirtas and Frankel 1998: 11). Typically stable variables, regime identities need continuous social interaction to have meaning. Therefore, abrupt events, such as a revolution, wars, domestic conflicts, and balance change, can pressure an alteration of these identities (Breuning 2012, p. 308). Moreover, leaders can initiate social-engineering measures to adapt the relations between the state and the society and, through this process, produce identitarian adjustments (Darwich 2014, pp. 5–6).

Changes in a regime's identity happen when it can no longer enjoy a sense of ontological security, meaning the ability to experience oneself as a whole (Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006). Mitzen (2006, p. 343) argues that ‘ontological insecurity refers to the deep, incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore.’ In other words, it is when the concerns about the *self* get so overwhelming that one does not have coherent self-schemas to cope with the number of threats and uncertainty from the environment. Regimes can feel threatened by others' identities not only when they are quite different but also when they are similar, provoking ontological distress.¹¹ Whenever the distinctiveness between ‘what it is and

¹¹ Darwich 2014, p. 10 referred to the Freudian concept of ‘narcissism of small differences’ for explaining the phenomenon where pre-established self-other distinctions are eroded, and actors become more and more uncomfortable with who they are, unable to accommodate with new circumstances.

what it is not' becomes too fuzzy or when discursive constructions of the *self* and the *other* are increasingly blurry, distress is triggered, and regime identities are modified.

In conclusion, regime identity works as a cognitive filter in the explanative chain. It provides different lenses from which policymakers can interpret what their country is about and what is not. Therefore, regime identity has a limiting effect on the dependent variable. Being mental constructs that describe and prescribe how an actor should act, this variable will exclude some policies, despite their feasibility. It narrows the options of outcomes – but it does not automatically define policy choices. Thus, the variable works as a filter that reduces the universe of possible actions to a smaller set of conceivable ones (Juneau 2015, pp. 24–26). Its value is explaining why policymakers discard a specific strategy as inconceivable or undesirable.

3.5.4 Third intervening variable: foreign policy executives

As discussed, cognitive and ideational variables are possible within the NCR analytical chain if under the clout of individual action. My final intervening variable asks about the characteristics and mindsets of those making policy daily. The foreign policy executives (FPE) correspond to *leadership* and how individuals can tilt policy outcomes to their favor and interests (Ripsman et al. 2016). They assess environment restrictiveness, evaluate the space for promoting ambitious behavior and select the cognitive lenses from which they can interpret their country's role in the system. Moreover, leaders do not make choices in an intellectual or contextual vacuum. Their beliefs, intellectual bias, personal motivations, preferences, and policy discourses influence their decisions.

In this thesis, FPE refers to the people who occupy critical leadership positions in a country and are responsible for the continuation or modification of foreign policy, long-term strategic planning, and elaboration of quick responses to unpredictable situations (Lobell 2009a, p. 45). It includes the president, prime minister, king, supreme leader, key cabinet members, ministers, and advisors, among others (Lobell et al. 2009b, p. 33). Many NCR scholars stress the importance of a leader's political discourse, beliefs, personality, and images in their analyses (Wohlforth 1993; Taliaferro 2004; Marsh 2014; Juneau 2015). The FPE often possess privileged access to information and intelligence, which allow them to make assessments that others would not necessarily do (Wohlforth 1993, pp. 26–27; Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 61). This position of privilege allows them to add their own interpretation of an incoming stimulus into the strategizing process, affecting the outcomes.

Also, even if the environment is permissible and with great clarity, decision-makers have inherent biases that emphasize certain aspects of reality and neglect others (Foulon 2015, p. 652). These biases can be detected in their political careers, leading foreign policy platforms, affiliations, or even closeness to other foreign actors. Other relevant points are a leader's personality, psychological characteristics, and operational codes influencing a systemic output response (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 64). In other words, each individual has her worldviews and past experiences that work as personal mental devices to simplify complex situations (Meibauer 2020, p. 9). Thus, while the regime identity strongly limits their action, they still have some individual agency as leaders. They can mix and match the available cognitive lenses, linking them to their political agenda and discourses.

Lobell (2009a, pp. 43–44) stresses that there is no clear-cut division between the international and the domestic spheres of action and that the FPE exists at the intersection between both political arenas. Therefore, the FPE has a particular Janus-faced characteristic: it can act internationally for domestic reasons or domestically for global purposes (Lobell 2009a, p. 60). In this sense, it often makes a trade-off between external and internal interests. Finally, a web of institutions, groups, and factions is also constantly interacting with the FPE. The interface between these actors may lead to certain compromises or the imposition of preferences that diverge from general expectations (Foulon 2015, p. 641).

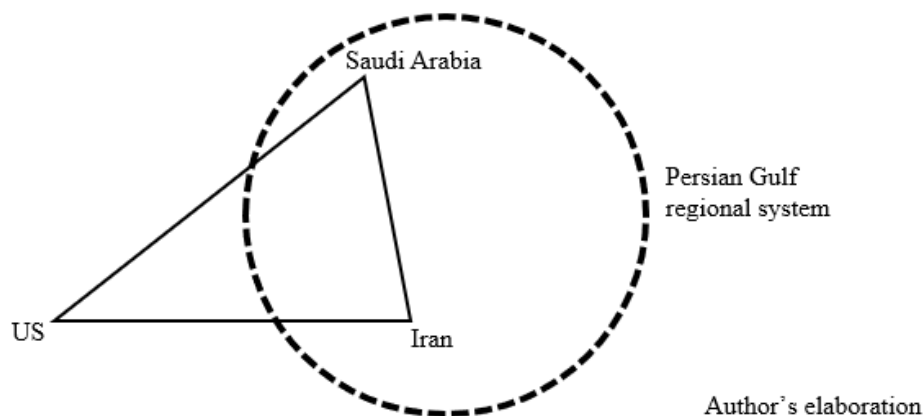
In my model, FPE works as the variable that puts the ideational and cognitive filters into working policies. It also reveals how the leaders' characteristics affect the translation of the systemic outputs into decisions. While the structure offers opportunities and constraints, the level of satisfaction with the ascribed status defines ambitions towards the system, and the regime identity limits the scope of action. It is up to those in charge to perceive and interpret these filtered inputs to define the output. Therefore, this variable's added value explains why some leaders chose one of the already filtered options and not others, tilting policy in their favor.

3.5.6 The dependent variable: the strategic triangle

This thesis is a deductive study that aims to sustain the hypothesis that the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran share a triangular relationship in which the three dyads are highly interconnected. I argue that this triangulation's structure, which is learned and reproduced by ideational understandings and cognitive schemas of each country, has limited the countries' grand strategizing in the region for decades. Moreover, I sustain that this triangle is a

characteristic of the Persian Gulf system, affecting the region's political dynamics. Thus, this strategic triangle is my dependent variable, meaning what I am trying to explain.

Image five: the dependent variable



At this point, it is important to shed light on the term *strategic triangle*. It was first employed by Dittmer (1981) to evaluate the relations between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. He considers that these countries shared patterns of highly interdependent relations, even if not formalized as such. He defines a strategic triangle as an arrangement of a tripartite relationship that constrains or influences the three countries' behavior. Dittmer's framework has been chiefly confined to Asian studies, applied to the US-China-Japan case (Ito 2003; Cohen 2005; Dittmer 2014) and the US-Russia-China case (Goldstein and Freeman 1991; Martínez Álvarez and Garza Elizondo 2011). The idea of triangular relations has also been discussed in cases like Brazil, Argentina, and the United States (Moniz Bandeira 2010), Israel, Iran, and the United States (Parsi 2007), and China, Russia, and Iran (Tabatabai and Esfandiary 2018). However, these studies use the term triangle as a semantic instrument to call attention to a particular grouping of three countries and their bilateral ties. They do not develop a theoretical framework or instigate discussions about complex patterns of inter-state relations.

Dittmer's construct does not open the state's black box, therefore, not fitting instantly to the NCR approach. His conceptualization is based on transitional costs to define policy choices, and it is grounded on game theory. It considers that all actors have the same access to information while ignoring a hierarchy level between security, economic, and political priorities. Therefore, I use his strategic triangle only as an analytical construct designed to generate hypotheses and stimulate more systematic thinking about complex relational patterns. I do not assume it is a theory or that demands any specific methodology. However, it simplifies

the understanding of triparty relationships by providing constructs that include the three dyads in one sole analysis, shifting the focus away from the bilateral relations. I thus borrow Dittmer's typology and lexicon to construct my model.

In Dittmer's triangle, the three participants must perceive each other as strategically salient for the system they are inserted in. That means they must recognize that the other two are crucial geopolitical actors, agreeing that they influence the environment – positively or negatively. Second, even if the three players are asymmetric in terms of power and do not share diplomatic relations, each must be recognized by the other two as autonomous players in the sense that they do not contest the other's sovereignty (Cohen 2005, p. 7). Three countries will share a strategic triangulation when satisfying these two demands and if their grand strategies are designed with awareness of each other. For that, each actor must include the other two in its grand strategy assessment regarding the Persian Gulf. Moreover, each bilateral relationship must be liable to the other two participant's relationships (Dittmer 1981, p. 491). That means A+B relations can change if something happens between A+C or C+B.

There are three types of NCR dependent variables: type I (short-term foreign policy choices), type II (policy planning and grand strategic adjustment), and type III (a theory of international politics). This thesis' dependent variable is in the realm of type II, as it considers the US's, Saudi Arabian, and Iranian grand strategies towards the Persian Gulf. Grand strategy is how decision-makers assess national interests, threats, and resources to rank international policy priorities and outline a plan to meet these goals (Dueck 2006). The intervening variables enable the analysis of this path-dependent process of ranking capabilities, interests, and constraints. Grand strategy's formulation 'starts with decision-makers surveying the geostrategic environment, paying attention to the situations of their own state, its enemies, allies, and third parties and of these actors' likely response' (Onea 2021, p. 9). Thus, a grand strategy combines distinct state-to-state relations, how state's decision contexts are intertwined, and how their interaction plays out systemically.

Nevertheless, as I argue that the triangle is a characteristic of the Persian Gulf system, these three grand strategies correspond to a regional dynamic in the long term. Each chapter's dependent variable section discusses the triangular relationship throughout a selected period, tracing its main *tendencies* and stressing how they played out within the regional system. Considering that the four chapters cover forty-five years, it is possible to say that the thesis is

also in the realm of NCR type III, long-term systemic outcomes. Systemic outcomes are ‘observable political phenomena resulting from the coaction and interaction of the strategies pursued by two or more actors in the international arena’ (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 85). According to Kitchen (2021, p. 12), type III investigates how systemic outcomes are produced, exploring a system’s character beyond the balance of power configurations.

This way, this thesis can be classified as both type II and type III, primarily dependent on how the observer understands systemic outcomes. It explores how the three countries' grand strategies are interdependent while simultaneously discussing how they interact within a regional system. That shows that the difference between NCR types is related to case selection and temporality rather than methodology. This idea goes in line with Desmaele’s (2021, p. 5) argument that NCR is an approach to studying path-dependent emulation within international relations. Anarchy pressures the states to mirror each other’s practice, a process that is done via domestic perception, assessment of options, and ascription (*foreign policy*). Through time, the maintenance of the domestic learned process that leads to effective policies may become an end in itself (*grand strategy*). Finally, the long-term interaction of grand strategies counts for shifts within the system (*systemic outputs*). In other words, NCR recognizes that the system is both productive as well as a product.

3.6 Final remarks

This chapter justified how NCR can be fruitful for IRME studies. The following four chapters are the empirical analysis, in which I employ process tracing to sustain the hypothesis that the three actors have shared four different triangular relations since the formation of the Persian Gulf system. Each chapter begins by contextualizing an event that alters the regional power balance and proceeds to apply the NCR explanative chain. After the contextualization, I investigate the stable and changeable power of the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia throughout the selected periods. The next step is to investigate the intervening variables. Status satisfaction is the ideational variable determining if an actor is revisionist or status quo. Regime identity is the cognitive variable that eliminates outcomes that do not follow the country’s self-image. The FPE is the leadership variable, which describes political preferences, idiosyncrasies, and strategic choices. Each chapter's final section examines the strategic triangle during the selected period, tracing the main tendencies. Finally, each chapter presents a conclusion that I sustain or discard the thesis’ hypotheses.

4. First triangle: The *Ménage a Trois* (1969-1979)

This chapter's structure follows the NCR model I designed in the previous chapter. First, it introduces the historical event that provoked a systemic change, in this case, the British decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf at the end of the 1960s. The sequence explores the contextualized power of the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia during the decade. For each country, I divide power into stable power (geography, demography, military, and economy) and changeable power (alliances, partnerships, diplomatic ties, and regional appeal). Afterward, I discuss the balance of power within the Persian Gulf, showcasing the three countries' positions.

The assessment of the intervening variables comes next. I measure status satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives for each country throughout the selected period. The final section presents the dependent variable, which is the triangular relationship. I do not discuss comprehensively all the interactions between the three countries during the period, but rather the triangle's tendencies. This triangle's tendency was the Twin Pillar Diplomacy, in which the three countries worked together to maintain the status quo. The final pages provide concluding remarks and introduce the next triangulation.

4.1 The British withdrawal

As presented in the second chapter, the United Kingdom was the Persian Gulf's political arbiter from the middle of the nineteenth century until the eve of the 1970s (Petersen 2011, pp. 15–25). Among the many consequences of the Second World War for the European powers was political overstretch, which exposed the British's limitation to hold rule outside the island's borders. As a result, local dissatisfaction and protests rose around the many UK's colonies, especially those that participated in the war (Fain 2008; Petersen 2011). The 1956 Suez crisis in Egypt and the 1958 Iraqi Revolution (which overthrew the British-friendly monarchy) reflected this general dissatisfaction. Hence, by 1968, a combination of financial weakness, increasingly nationalist sentiment in the remaining colonies, and an exhaustive political debate over the UK's priorities drove the Labor Party to announce its retraction from the Persian Gulf by 1971 (Fain 2008, p. 8). That implied that the Trucial States (the sheikdoms of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Umm al-Qaiain, Ajman, Fujairah, and Bahrain) were under the British protectorate, and needed to brace themselves for independence.

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the United Kingdom assumed a surrogate position for the Western interests in the Persian Gulf order, guaranteeing security and the normal oil flow to reconstruct European and Japanese economies. In other words, London's imperial role worked as a gatekeeper of the US's interests in the region, pushing away Soviet interference or influence, while Washington played only a secondary role, primarily via private oil companies (Petersen 2011; Cooper 2012). Consequently, the British withdrawal announcement represented a challenge for the Western block. It could open a power vacuum within the region for the Soviets to take advantage of (Peterson 2009; Gause 2010). From 1969 to 1971, there were intense consultations between the British and the Americans about the Persian Gulf's future (Fain 2008). They worried about possible local turmoil after the withdrawal and worked together to identify instability sources and how to neutralize them, avoiding general disturbance of the oil markets (Cohen 2005). This way, the withdrawal was not abrupt but calculated to maintain Western interests intact.

In short, the *Pax Britannica* guaranteed regional stability by preventing conflict between the small sheikdoms and discouraging the more prominent countries – Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia – from aggressive intentions (Fain 2008, p. 173; Gause 2010). It is important to stress that, since the discovery of oil in the region, the British authority was quite flexible, and most local leaders had guaranteed some level of independence (Peterson 2009). That also facilitated the power transition after the departure (Yetiv 2008, p. 29). Evidently, the most immediate consequence was the end of the Trucial system: in 1968, Bahrain and Qatar became independent countries, and, in 1971, the six emirates unified into the United Arab Emirates. Nevertheless, despite the overall pacific and diplomatic transition, the withdrawal did alter the Persian Gulf's power distribution. It removed the extra-regional actor while empowering some regional countries and creating new ones, leaving a temporary power vacuum concerning who would guarantee the local states' stability. Thus, the regional system was formed.

4.2 Independent variable: power in context

4.2.1 The US's power

4.2.1.1 Stable power

With the end of the Second World War, the United States consolidated itself as a global power, showcasing all the conventional resources to be classified as such. In terms of territory,

it is the third-largest country in the world. It has an overall well-distributed and large population that has grown steadily. During the selected period, the demographic growth rate was 0,97% in 1969 and 1,1% in 1979, meaning there were 202.6 million Americans in 1970 and 225 million in 1979 (World Bank n.d.s, n.d.v). Geographically, the country has access to both the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, which work as natural protection borders. Moreover, it shares territorial frontiers only with Canada and Mexico, two long-standing friends – and weaker in military terms. Concerning resources, it has abundant agricultural land and a diverse set of natural resources, including oil and the world's largest coal reserves. Finally, its political system has been stable since the 1860s civil war, being the longest democracy alive.

Moreover, the United States was the only country involved in the Second World War that had absolute and relative gains from the conflict (Layne 2006, p. 41). Therefore, it oversaw the new global order's reconfiguration process after 1945, assuming the position of the Western bloc's leader in opposition to the Eastern one. Throughout the Cold War, the United States held the status of the most powerful country in the world. The 1950s and 1960s were their most remarkable economic and military expansion period, consolidating the superpower position. The so-called Golden Age of American capitalism was defined by exponential rising GDP, consumption expansion, higher wages, lower unemployment, and elevated government spending (Onea 2012). Moreover, Washington invested its strategic forces via high procurements, improving training, and acquiring high-tech weaponry (Gray and Barlow 1985, p. 40). By the eve of the 1970s, there was no doubt about the US's power preeminence.

Nevertheless, the 1970s represented the first moment since 1945 of deceleration for the United States. The GDP grew at a slower pace than before, going from US\$ 1,02 trillion in 1969 to US\$ 2,62 trillion in 1979 (World Bank n.d.g). The GDP growth rate was negative in 1970 (-0,3%), 1974 (-0,5%) and 1975 (-0,2%), closing the selected period at 3,1% in 1979 (World Bank n.d.j). It is key to stress that most Western economies were affected by the 1973 oil crisis and the end of the Bretton Woods system, which led to a crash in the stock market and stagflation in the United States. Simultaneously, a new wave of industrialized countries was catching up, increasing competition and reducing the production gap between the United States and other industrial countries (Sargent 2013; Brands 2016). Hence, the US's global share of oil and steel production and general exports declined in the first half of the 1970s (Brands 2016).

A similar tendency of relative deceleration is detected in the military. The military expansion during the 1950s and the 1960s aimed to achieve an overwhelmingly preponderant power advantage (defense and offense) over the Soviet Union to frustrate any Kremlin's political ambitions in Europe (Layne 2006, pp. 58–64). While it was still the most distinguished military power in traditional capabilities and innovation, the Soviet Union was catching up (Dueck 2006, p. 82). In the early 1970s, the URSS achieved nuclear parity (Yetiv 2008, p. 30). Moreover, the Cold War *détente*, established in the mid-1960s, reduced the fear of total war in Washington and allowed redistribution of governmental spending (Williams 1987). As a result, the military budget was reduced for the first time, going from US\$ 84,9 billion in 1969 to US\$ 81,4 billion in 1973, increasing again by the second half of the decade, reaching US\$ 126,8 billion in 1979 (World Bank n.d.p). Furthermore, dissent over the Vietnam War, the overreach of the army, and the economic recession in the 1970s compromised the state's ability to allocate resources for international conflicts (Brands 2016; Gray and Barlow 1985). Whereas in 1969, the military expenditure accounted for 8.2% of the total GDP, it reduced to 4.7% in 1979 (World Bank n.d.m).

Thus, despite continuing as the undeniably most powerful military country worldwide, the decade of 1970 represented a relative retrenchment for the US forces (Brands 2016). Many procurement requests aimed to replace the warcraft lost in Vietnam, not to expand it. Moreover, from 1969 to 1973, military personnel was reduced to stay within budget constraints. In 1969, the military personnel counted 3460 thousand people, reaching 1979 at 2033 thousand (Singer et al. 1972). Nonetheless, it is important to stress that reducing the active fleet was balanced with forces modernization (Gray and Barlow 1985, p. 64; Brands 2016).

When it comes to the military presence in the Persian Gulf, the superpower's strategy relied on UK's surrogate role and its ability to guarantee order (Petersen 2011, pp. 49–50). Thus, Washington's military footprint was small by the end of the 1960s (Fain 2008, pp. 160–161). Its presence was made via the Sixth Fleet, which patrolled the Mediterranean, and a token naval presence at Jufayr, Bahrain, which relied on British hospitality since 1947 (Hahn 2006, 41; Sick 2018, p. 316).¹² From 1971 to 1973, Washington built, in cooperation with London, a Naval Communications Station at Diego Garcia island, from where it coordinated operations with

¹² It was part of the US Navy operations and represented a series of task groups operations that supervised oilers, provided logistic, and protected companies against invasion.

partners. However, this station could not project power directly into the region. As the dependent variable explores further, the United States chose to deal with its power deficiency through new local surrogates instead of building a permanent physical force during the period. This way, they did not increase their military power in the Persian Gulf during the 1970s.

4.2.1.2 Changeable power

Changeable power refers to non-material resources that enable a country to convince, coerce, or entice others to pursue its interests. It appraises alliances, partnerships, participation in multilateral endeavors, and political appeal. In global terms, the United States was the superpower representing the West, guaranteeing itself a position of unequal power and influence among those belonging to the bloc (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006). It shared overall good relations with all the capitalist countries, and, during the selected period, it was in a *détente* moment with the Soviet Union and opening relations with China. Considering the thesis' focus is the Persian Gulf system, this section comprises the actors' ability to interact with other regional actors, establish political architectures, negotiate, and influence outcomes.

The United States has been politically engaged in the Middle East since the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine, which aimed to control the spread of communism in the region by financial and military assistance (Hahn 2006, 46). President Dwight Eisenhower's (1953-1961) stance against the European colonial attempts to retake the Suez Canal from Egypt in 1956 yielded Washington a greater political appeal among the Middle Easterners (Yetiv 2008, p. 30; Fain 2008, pp. 175–176). After that, the United States assumed primary responsibility for safeguarding Western interests in the West of Suez, while the British kept them in the Persian Gulf (Hurewitz 1972, p. 107). The backbone of the US's interests in the region was the Central Treaty Organization (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, USA, and United Kingdom), founded in 1958.¹³ Moreover, the Americans got closer to conservative Arab countries during the 1950s and 1960s, as they despised communism and its connections to pan-Arabism (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 221).

By 1969, Washington had good relations with most countries in the Persian Gulf, but Iraq, which was under Soviet influence (Petersen 2011, p. 28). During the 1970s, relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia evolved at a swift pace: Iran became a crucial partner, while Saudi Arabia followed next. As this chapter further discusses, Washington developed a shared securitarian

¹³ While a founding member, Iraq already departure in 1959, weakening the organization.

agenda for the region with Iran. Particularly during the Nixon presidency, the Iranian Shah and the president frequently visited each other and consulted over many topics (Alvandi 2012). Moreover, Both Tehran and Riyadh became loyal buyers of US weaponry and aligned themselves within the capitalist block (Petersen 2011; Cooper 2012). Finally, Washington quickly recognized the Trucial States' independence and initiated diplomatic ties with them (Petersen 2011). Throughout the decade, Washington did not have diplomatic ties only with Iraq and South Yemen (a Marxist regime), mirroring the Cold War orientation.

4.2.2 Iranian power

4.2.2.1 Stable power

Iran has significant potential to be a regional power considering its size, population, location, and resources. Geographically, it is the second-largest Middle Eastern country with a highly strategic position, accessing the Caspian Sea and the Arabian Sea via the Persian Gulf and sharing borders with seven other states. Moreover, its chains of mountains and central wastelands make it a tough country to be conquered if invaded (Juneau 2015, p. 56). Most importantly, it has the second-largest oil reserves globally and shares with Qatar the largest natural gas field globally, the South Pars, which holds approximately 1.800 trillion cub feet of gas. Furthermore, it has a demographical advantage compared to other Persian Gulf countries, with a much larger and well-distributed population. During the selected period, Iran's population increased on an average of 2.5-3.5% a year, going from 27,76 million in 1969 to 37.23 million in 1979, becoming one of the most populous nations in the Middle East (World Bank n.d.q).

During the selected period, Iran was under the Pahlavi dynasty's rule, inaugurated in 1925 by General Reza Khan (1925-1941), who was replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in 1941. It was a monarchical regime, secular and capitalist. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Shah eliminated his opposition and took control of the oil industry and the military structure to transform Iran into a regional power (Abrahamian 2008, p. 119; Ward 2009, p. 188). In 1963, he launched the White Revolution, a top-down political program that brought about land reforms and a minor industrial build-up, transforming the demography and modernizing the economy (Ansari 2001, p. 2; Abrahamian 2008, p. 123). That gave the Shah the tools to convert Iran into a powerhouse, but, contradictorily, it also started to erode the regime's

legitimacy and its capacity to conduct the social contract, eventually leading to the 1979 revolution.

Economically, Iran was a rentier state, highly dependent on its oil exportation. In 1971, a massive agreement signed in Tehran granted the OPEC members control over the oil market, increasing their power to determine prices. As a result, oil revenues in Iran went from US\$ 885 million in 1971 to US\$ 1.6 billion in 1972 (Ward 2009, p. 194). Moreover, Iran profited substantially from the economic boom after the 1973 oil crisis, skyrocketing the barrel prices (Ward 2009, p. 193; Saikal 2019). The GDP growth rate was substantial in the first half of the period, from 16.3% in 1969 to 17.2% in 1976 (World Bank n.d.h). GDP increased from US\$ 9,7 billion in 1969 to US\$ 80,6 billion in 1977, closing the period at US\$ 90,39 billion in 1979 (World Bank n.d.e). The number of small and medium-sized factories increased, and trade expanded regionally and internationally (Abrahamian 2008, p. 133; Shabafrouz 2009). There was also an urbanization boom, with the urban population becoming more than half of the total population and overcrowding metropolitan centers (Esfahani and Pesaran 2009, p. 26).

However, the economic growth exceeded the country's infrastructure, resulting in financial bottlenecks and economic malpractices (Saikal 2019, p. 40). Channeling the oil revenues into social benefits became a challenge aggravated by growing corruption, abuse of power, and out-of-control spending (Ansari 2001, p. 5; Abrahamian 2008, pp. 144–148). In the second half of the 1970s, the economy became overheated, and the consumer price inflation rose to almost 30% of the GDP (Esfahani and Pesaran 2009, p. 27). In short, the economic development did not meet the public expectations and created inflationary bubbles that increased living costs, especially for the lower classes (Abrahamian 2008, p. 152; Saikal 2019, p. 40). As a result, wealth stuck within the elite, and social inequality raised fast. On the eve of the revolution, almost 70% of the adult population remained illiterate, the agricultural economy was crumbling, and new urban underclasses emerged daily (Pesaran 1997; Abrahamian 2008, p. 141; Ward 2009, p. 195).

Concerning military power, the oil boom of the 1970s liberated capital for defense investment. Moreover, due to the British withdrawal, Tehran was given access to virtually any conventional US weapon system and military technology it wanted (Ward 2009, p. 194; Fürting 2002, p. 10). Hence, military expenses rose from US\$ 566 million in 1969 to US\$ 8,1 billion in 1978 and closed the period at US\$ 4,9 billion in 1979 (World Bank n.d.n). While in 1969,

military expenditure amounted to only 5,9% of the GDP, in 1978, it doubled, reaching 11.1% (World Bank n.d.k). Iran bought weaponry mainly from the United States, the UK and France (Ward 2009, pp. 195–201). The focus was on modernization, especially the arms and air forces, buying F-14 Tomcats, modern destroyers, tankers, submarines, and fighter planes.

With Washington's assistance, Iran invested in many defense and offense missiles and nuclear power infrastructure (McGlinchey 2012, pp. 193–203). By the end of the decade, Iran was among the most powerful countries in the Middle East. It had military personnel of 415 thousand in 1979 and invested heavily in leading technology and training. Its army was the fifth-largest globally, a source of high prestige to the Pahlavi regime (McGlinchey 2012, p. 6). Also, it had sophisticated air forces, larger than the ones in France or West Germany (Ward 2009, p. 198). Finally, its powerful naval forces could ensure dominance over all Persian Gulf littoral (Abrahamian 2008, p. 124; Ward 2009, pp. 198–199).

Nonetheless, the military displayed signs of malfunction, such as difficulties in absorbing the purchased technologies, struggles with operational ranges, shortages of training facilities, decentralized logistical systems, weak communication networks, and lacking skilled personnel (Ward 2009, pp. 205–210). A 1997 US's report found that Iran lacked military expertise and depended heavily on American assistance despite having available material and technology (Ward 2009, p. 210). Moreover, the Shah channeled all military communications to his office, penalized officers, and continuously reorganized the forces' structures, provoking politicization and lethargy (Abrahamian 2008, p. 152). Hence, the military was also inflexible and unprepared to deal with the growing social-political crisis that led to the 1979 revolution (Hiro 2018, p. 60).

4.2.2.2 Changeable power

When discussing Iran's changeable power, it is essential to stress that it is the odd one out in the Persian Gulf regarding ethnic and religious affiliation. While the majority is Arab and subscribe to the Sunni tradition, Iran's population is Persian and Shia. This distinct cultural identity meant that Iran had fewer natural allies in the region (Kinch 2016, p. 33). The Pahlavi dynasty used this ontological differentiation as a political strategy to promote Iran as closer to the Western values than its Arab neighbors, which were suspicious of the Pahlavi regime. While the Arab countries did not have hostile relations with Iran (with the exception of Iraq), there was no natural convergence of interests either. By the beginning of the period, Iran had territorial

disputes with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the Ra's-al-Kayma and Sharjah's emirates (al-Saud 2003). Local leaders also rejected Pahlavi's territorial claims over Bahrain and the smaller islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs (Ramazani 1997).

Iran was a founding member of the CENTO alliance, which played a critical role in checking Soviet influence in the Middle East. Due to its geostrategic location, Iran built a solid partnership with the United States, which provided military and diplomatic support (Kinch 2016, p. 33). In 1959, it signed a defense agreement with the superpower and by the early 1970s, it had become the largest recipient of US aid outside NATO (Saikal 2019, p. 20). During the selected period, Iran shared a special status among the Western countries, participating in several international meetings and often hosting high-level official visits in Tehran (Cooper 2012, pp. 33–40). In October 1971, for example, the Shah received many international authorities to celebrate the 2.500 anniversary of the Persian Empire in a lavish event in Persepolis (Ansari 1998, p. 302). Additionally, it had working relations with Israel, something unique for a Middle Eastern country at that time.

The British departure improved the country's status, as the Western countries perceived Iran as the only powerful country capable of assuming the UK's role. In 1971, during a Tehran visit, Nixon asked the Shah to 'protect me,' insisting that Iran had a decisive position in the struggle against URSS (Alvandi 2012, p. 367). Throughout the decade, Iran was committed to anti-communist operations in Pakistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, and others. However, to fulfill the UK's shoes, Iran needed to improve its ties with the other Persian Gulf countries. Hence, it ended a dispute with Riyadh over shelf boundaries, abandoned claims over Bahrain in 1978, and signed the 1975 Algiers to settle border disputes with Iraq (Ramazani 1997; Alvandi 2010).

These decisions improved the country's regional relations, and, by the end of the period, Iran shared positive relations with all the new Persian Gulf sheikhdoms (Alvandi 2010; Ramazani 1997). As a result, it signed shelf agreements with Kuwait in 1970 and Bahrain in 1971. In the late 1970s, Iran and Oman agreed to a joint patrolling operation in the Strait of Hormuz, solving their territorial misunderstandings (Ramazani 1997). By 1975, it had diplomatic representation in all the region but South Yemen and Iraq (Singer et al. 1972). Thus, even if Iran began the decade with a low appeal and few partnerships in the Persian Gulf, its changeable power expanded during the period.

4.2.3 Saudi Arabia's power

4.2.3.1 Stable power

Unlike the United States and Iran, Saudi Arabia has more intrinsic vulnerabilities that limit its potential to be a regional power. Geography is crucial to grasp Saudi Arabia's power, as it lays out advantages and shortcomings. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia is the largest Middle Eastern country, around 2.1 million km². It has abundant energy resources, amounting to the second-largest proven reserves of crude oil (266.2 billion bbl.) and the fourth of natural gas (8.6 trillion cubic meters).¹⁴ It has a strategic location, accessing the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea and bordering seven countries. On the other hand, it is a desert country, depleted of underground water resources or other permanent river bodies. The population is poorly distributed, concentrated in a few areas surrounding urban conurbations, and chunks of its territory are inhabited (Jones 2010, p. 20). By 1969, the Saudi population was 5,6 million inhabitants, while Iran was 27,7 million and Iraq 9,58 million (World Bank n.d.u). Nevertheless, it had one of the most significant growth rates in the Middle East – 3,8% in 1969 and 5,5% in 1979. (World Bank n.d.r). Moreover, the fertility rate was around 7,2 children per woman during the decade (World Bank n.d.d). Thus, the population grew to 9,1 million in 1979 (World Bank n.d.u).

The Al Saud family founded Saudi Arabia in 1932, and the dynasty has been ruling the monarchy ever since.¹⁵ The unification of the Arab peninsula's tribes by King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud (1932-1953) was via military conquest, co-option of dissent, and a powerful alliance between the dynasty and the Wahhabi clergy of Najd (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 83; Mabon 2016, p. 81). The discovery of oil in commercial quantities in 1938 provided the regime financial security, leading to the gradual strengthening of the political authority via the redistribution of oil rents to the population (Niblock 2006, p. 26; Jones 2010, p. 10). The monarchs guaranteed their political legitimacy via maintaining the rentier social contract and the king's duty toward Wahhabism (Kechichian 2000, p. 48; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 126). In this sense, the regime grew dependent on the oil market and the Islamic practice's safeguard.

The selected period encompasses King Faisal's reign (1964-1975), who successfully centralized the rule, consolidated government institutions, elevated Saudi Arabia's foreign

¹⁴ CIA World Factbook.

¹⁵ The first and second Saudi realms (1744–1818 and 1824–1891 respectively) failed to permanently unify the peninsula's vast territories and multiple tribes. After the fall of the second Saudi realm, its leader, Abd al-Rahman Al Saud, was forced into exile to Kuwait by the Rashidi clan Keynough 2016.

relations, and strengthened the domestic bureaucracy (Jones 2010, p. 88; Niblock 2006, p. 42). That was possible mainly due to the increased oil revenues after 1973, which provided capital for investment, development plans, modernization, and defense build-up (Keynoush 2016, p. 102). As a result, the country became the world's top oil producer, with enough production capacity to have the final say on the settlement of global prices (Pollack 2002, p. 82). Hence, the period represented a boost in Saudi Arabia's power due to its economic expansion.

The oil boom liberated Saudi Arabia from fiscal restraint and pecuniary caution (Long 2004; Jones 2010, p. 4). The GDP growth rate went from 6% in 1969 to 11,9% in 1979 (World Bank n.d.j). That meant the GDP went from US\$ 4,46 billion in 1969 to US\$ 111,9 billion in 1979 (World Bank n.d.f). Within OPEC, Saudi Arabia became a swing-price country because it had enough production capacity to change the global oil prices by accelerating or halting its extraction. Domestically, oil wealth allowed for a more efficient redistribution via a dense welfare system, ultimately consolidating the family's grip on power (Jones 2010, p. 5). Faisal implemented a development plan to build institutions and infrastructure while engendering social and political harmony through services, public goods, and no taxation (Al-Rasheed 2010; Jones 2010, p. 83). Most importantly, Riyadh assumed in 1974 the majority ownership of Aramco, the world's biggest oil company (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 243).

Nevertheless, by the time the British announced their departure, Saudi Arabia did not have the military capabilities to guarantee regional order or assist in the upcoming monarchies' defense (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 126). The army was small (60 thousand personnel in 1969, 79 thousand in 1979), and there was no military culture, meaning recruitment was voluntary and not considered well-paid or prestigious (Singer et al. 1972; Cronin 2013, 2). Moreover, the monarchy was highly suspicious of military dissent, and, for that matter, it avoided centralization within the forces. In general, the mobilization of human resources into army forces in the Persian Gulf monarchies is relatively weak because of the notion that institutionalizing conscription could disturb the rentier social contract (Gause 1994, p. 123).

Notwithstanding, the overwhelming income of petrodollars after 1973 created more space for investment in military expenditure. There was progress in institutionalization and modernization of the defense and security apparatus in the second half of the decade (Safran 1998, p. 181; Pollack 2002, p. 83). Military expenses skyrocketed, going from US\$ 429,3 million in 1969 to US\$ 17,6 billion in 1979 (World Bank n.d.o). In 1969, the defense budget

amounted to 9.5% of the total GDP, and, in 1979, this number increased to 15.7% (World Bank n.d.). During the decade, Saudi Arabia gradually developed a political-strategic conception for its defense that focused on procurements for the three regular armed forces' three-branch (Safran 1998, p. 196). They wanted to guarantee enough defense capabilities that would make it costly for others to attack them. Riyadh bought most of its weaponry from the United States, spending more than US\$ 34 billion on the equipment during the 1970s (Pollack 2002; Wynbrandt 2004, p. 244). Special emphasis was given to the build-up of the Saudi Royal Air Force (RSAF). In 1978, Saudi Arabia caught up and surmounted the Iranians in military spending.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia could not effectively translate their financial power into military clout throughout the period due to human, technical, and physical constraints (Safran 1998, p. 179). An endemic problem was the lack of military culture and command-and-control authority. The imperative of sustaining the tribal ascendancy within the chains of command as a way to keep loyalty to the king made self-reliance less feasible (Gause 1994, p. 123; Cronin 2013, p. 2). Thus, achieving professionalization and institutionalization is tricky. Moreover, much of the defense expenditure was allocated to constructing military centers, training contracts, and other essential first-step capacitation. Hence, in case of a foreign threat, Riyadh needed outside support to guarantee its protection (Safran 1998, p. 210; Keynoush 2016, p. 101). They could not absorb all the military spending, and the investments' cost-efficiency kept low during the period.

4.2.3.2 *Changeable power*

Saudi Arabia has ethnic, cultural, and religious characteristics working as power resources in the Persian Gulf. Virtually all its population is Arabic and Sunni, except the Shia minority in the Eastern province. It is also home to two of the three Muslim sacred cities, Mecca, and Medina, the latter where the *Hajj*, a massive Islamic pilgrimage, happens yearly. Throughout the period, Saudi Arabia was the only modern country ruled by Sharia. All these elements gave them an exceptional position within the *ummah*. During the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia positioned itself in the conservative camp against Nasser's Arabism, as it worried about the damage the ideology could cause to the Islamic nations (Khalidi 2018). As Nasser's popularity decreased, Riyadh's conservative Islamic model gained a positive reputation within the Arab world (Niblock 2006, p. 47; Riedel 2018, pp. 45–47). Likewise, its leadership at the first Islamic Summit in Rabat (1969) was well-received by the Arabs (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 202).

During the 1970s, Riyadh shared good relations with virtually all Middle Eastern countries except South Yemen and Iraq. It also aligned itself with the West, rejecting communism and socialism vehemently. It endorsed partnerships and alliances across the Middle East with other conservative Muslim countries, providing economic and political assistance to organizations and charities worldwide (Eilts 2001: 233; Al Rasheed 2010: 128). It is estimated that, only in 1978, Riyadh spent an average of US\$ 5 billion on foreign aid (Bowman 2005: 97). Moreover, it sponsored anti-communist movements in Angola, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia, investing in conservative causes worldwide (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 234; Niblock 2006, p. 67).

Relations with the United States have been positive since 1943, when President Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz famously met on the USS Quincy. The peaceful transition of ARAMCO's control from the Americans to the Saudis and the growing military-economic transactions indicated the positive relations between the two countries. In June 1974, Nixon became the first president to visit Saudi Arabia (Riedel 2018, p. 123). Saudis also shared working relations with most European countries, which enhanced their global relevance, particularly after the oil crisis (Safran 1998, p. 232). Faisal's modernization program also helped improve the country's image among European countries (Riedel 2018, p. 54). By the mid-1970s, Saudis had substantial reserves in Western banking institutes and participated in many economic councils (Kechichian 2008, p. 121).

The British departure enhanced Saudi Arabia's changeable power. The newly independent countries were fragile and could create problems maintaining the regional order, mainly if they assumed revisionist regimes (Safran 1998, p. 149). However, Riyadh promoted itself as a successful monarchical model, and these new countries emulated similar governments (Eilts 2011, p. 222). The Saudis assisted their independence processes, guaranteeing a privileged reputation among them. It also secured positive working relations with Bahrain and Qatar and terminated an ongoing border dispute with the United Arab Emirates in 1974 (Petersen 2011). They signed defense agreements for military cooperation and non-aggression pacts with all the Sunni monarchies (Singer et al. 1972). Finally, Saudi Arabia had positive relations with Iran, and, after the 1975 Algiers agreements, it improved ties with Iraq (Safran 1998, p. 137; Niblock 2006, p. 50). By the end of the 1970s, it shared high changeable power, with its regional influence endorsed by religious leadership, partnerships, and Western alignment.

4.3 The Persian Gulf's power balance

The British departure was a systemic change because it removed the extra-regional power capable of maintaining the Persian Gulf under the Western political clout during the Cold War. Simultaneously, it forced the independence of new countries. In their majority tribal confederations, some feared that revolutionary and communist-leaning ideologies in South Yemen or Iraq could inspire the new countries. That forced the actors interested in preserving the regional order to formulate new geopolitical strategies. Among the interested were the two conservative monarchies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and, evidently, the United States.

Table one: comparable stable power in the region (1969-1979)

Country	GDP (current USD)			GDP growth rate			Military spending (current USD)			Military personnel		
	1969	1975	1979	1969	1975	1979	1969	1975	1979	1969	1975	1979
United States	1,02 Tn	1,68 Tn	2,62 Tn	3,1%	-0,2%	3,1%	84,9 Bn	92 Bn	126,8 Bn	3,4 M	2 M	2 M
Iran	9,74 Bn	51,7 Bn	90,3 Bn	16,3%	-2,4%	-10%	566 M	5,9 Bn	4,9 Bn	225 k	420 k	415 k
Saudi Arabia	4,48 Bn	46,77 Bn	111,8 Bn	6%	-8,9%	11,9%	429,3 M	*1977 11,5 Bn	17,6 Bn	60 k	75 k	79 k
Iraq	3,0 Bn	13,4 Bn	37,8 Bn	3,2%	12,5%	20,9%	375,9 M	1,59 Bn	2,3 Bn	90 k	155 k	444 k

Author's elaboration ¹⁶

The 1970s represented for the United States a moment of economic deceleration, military overstretch, and growing competition, particularly with the Soviet Union reaching nuclear parity. Washington had virtually no direct power projection within the Persian Gulf. Power constraints, together with the environmental openness offered by the Cold War détente, drove them to keep it that way (Yetiv 2008, p. 32). It improved its changeable power throughout the period by enhancing relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, establishing diplomatic ties with the new monarchies, and boosting military transactions with local partners. However, it did not assume the British role nor establish a robust physical presence in the region.

¹⁶ GDP, GDP growth rate, and military expenditure were taken from the World Bank database, while the military personnel from the Correlates of War database (Singer et al. 1972).

The regional system was multipolar, marked by Iran's growingly military empowerment, Saudi Arabia's economic strengthening, and a gradual reduction of the Iraqi revisionist stand. Iran and Iraq shared some characteristics of rising powers and sought regional leadership (Aarts and van Duijne 2009, p. 65). Their dynamic mirrored the Cold War: Iran was a US partner, while Iraq a URSS one. Saddam Hussain ruled under slogans of unity, pan-Arabism, and socialism (Yetiv 2008, p. 34). Conversely, Iran was the stronghold of the Western interests in the region, receiving massive amounts of American weaponry and training yearly. Nevertheless, to be a regional leader, a country needs recognition from others (Yetiv 1999). By 1969, Iran and Iraq lacked the changeable elements to be considered. Thus, the region was not a bipolar order.

In its turn, Saudi Arabia had more changeable power. It was a Sunni, dynastical, conservative monarchy with huge Islamic cultural capital. It assisted the smaller Gulf monarchies in their independence process, ensuring they were under its political clout. Saudi Arabia also aided, financed, and supported Muslim institutions worldwide. It shared positive ties with most local countries and a position of prestige among religious communities. Equality important was Riyadh's economic empowerment after the 1973 oil crisis. The decade consolidated Saudi Arabia as a Middle Eastern economic force while strengthening the dynastical regime via resource redistribution. Nonetheless, it was unable to reduce its military weakness, despite huge investments. For this reason, it is impossible to equate Riyadh with Tehran or Baghdad in power terms during the period.

During the selection, it became visible that the growing military superiority of Iran over Iraq due to American backing led to the settlement of the 1975 Algiers agreements favoring Tehran (Hiro 2018, p. 53). After 1975, Saddam gave some accommodation signals, reducing Saudi Arabia's and the US's concerns about a communist disturbance. In this sense, when only looking at the balance of power, after 1975, there was a moment of relaxation. Iran showed regional power potential, whereas Iraq came second. While in a more vulnerable position, Saudi Arabia had abundant what the other two lacked: cultural and religious shared traits with regional actors. Nevertheless, Iranian state-society relations were strained throughout the decade, mainly due to the inability to transform the oil revenues into social-economic benefits (Ansari 2001, p. 19), paving the way for the 1979 revolution.

The period's analysis gains much-needed nuance by compartmentalizing power into stable and changeable, highlighting the dynamic material and non-material elements available

for the countries to exert influence and dominance. However, only through the balance of power can one not explain the US's decision to elaborate a strategy for the Persian Gulf that included Saudi Arabia and not only Iran. Neither can one explain Saudi Arabia's partnership with Iran, considering that it became clear that it was Tehran, not Baghdad, the most powerful country in the region with the hegemonic potential. For that reason, it is crucial to evaluate the factors influencing the decision-making process in the three countries and how domestic factors shaped the triangular relationship between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States from 1969 to 1979.

4.4 The intervening variables

4.4.1 First intervening variable: status satisfaction

- It showcases the country's ambitions toward the system.
- The ideational variable discusses if a country's perception of its ascribed status matches its aspired status.
- It shifts the parameters towards revisionism or continuity.

4.4.1.1 US's status satisfaction

Status satisfaction relates to whether the position a country idealizes for itself matches the one it perceives as ascribed by other actors. During the Cold War, the United States aspired to be the Western bloc's hegemon. In the West and East rivalry, Washington saw itself as the capitalist leader competing with URSS for power and influence. Thus, the United States promoted its socio-economic model (based on liberalism, capitalism, democracy, and individualism) to be emulated within the Western hemisphere, guaranteeing its political predominance and reducing the Soviet global influence (Layne 2006, pp. 35–36; Dueck 2006, p. 83). Since 1945, its superpower position was unmatched within the Western bloc, and no other actor attempted to compete. Hence, the US's status community embraced the country's predominant position, expecting, in return, that it protected the West. In President Nixon's words:

‘as of the United States, I can state here today without qualification: we have not turned away from the world. We know that with great power goes responsibility. We are neither boastful of our power, nor apologetic about it. We recognize that it exists, and that, as well as conferring certain advantages, it also implies upon us certain obligations’ (Nixon 1969).

Among the responsibilities of being the Western bloc's leader was to guarantee that the Persian Gulf's oil would keep flowing to the capitalist economies. Therefore, the British

decision to exit from the region represented a danger to the US's interests, increasing their anxiety about the regional environment (Zanchetta 2009, p. 23; Petersen 2011, p. 28). It was necessary to find a new strategy for the region, keeping it away from possible Soviet influence and guaranteeing that the environment would not disturb the oil market. However, the United States did not have the necessary military presence in the Persian Gulf to guarantee the order immediately. Moreover, while it had the 'interest in keeping the strategic territory out of Soviet hands and in using it for our own strategic purposes' (Foreign Relations of the United States January 30 / 1969), it also had 'no intention of replacing the British in the Persian Gulf' (Foreign Relations of the United States November 1970).

In short, with its surrogate actor's imminent departure, the United States had to find new ways to guarantee Western interests in the region. Nonetheless, a US interdepartmental paper evaluated that their situation in 1969 was 'neither as bad as the Cassandras claim nor as unshakeable as their detractors insist. Our position [in the Persian Gulf] is still significant, but it is probably vulnerable to the erosion of time' (Foreign Relations of the United States January 30 / 1969). Hence, they assessed that the systemic environment on the eve of the 1970s was not extremally restrictive but needed update and revision. Thus, to guarantee the order, it was necessary to draw a new strategy specific to the region that reduced the anxiety about maintaining the status quo and the Soviet threat.

This variable shows that external pressures forced the administration to produce its first policy specific to the Persian Gulf. Most regional actors, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, were already aligned with the Western hemisphere and interested in status quo continuity. Riyadh, particularly, expected the United States to expand its security ties in the region and assume the British role (Petersen 2011). On the other hand, Iran promoted itself as the most viable new surrogate actor to protect the regional order (Cooper 2012). Hence, the United States perceived the systemic environment as permissive for transferring the British responsibility to local actors, and its anxiety towards the order lessened throughout the period. Also contributing to this reduction was that the new regional monarchies emulated Saudi Arabia, pushing themselves away from Iraqi or Soviet influence. In this sense, the US's status ambitions within the Persian Gulf mostly matched the one the regional actors ascribed to it. It idealized the Persian Gulf outside the Soviet zone of influence. Except for Iraq, all local countries approved this ambition and anticipated more security ties with Washington.

The growing Iranian empowerment and the Iraqi political accommodation after 1975 represented a moment of great environmental openness for the Americans (Fain 2008). Thus, they were satisfied with their status in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, as the FPE variable discusses, Washington developed a policy that improved security and economic ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia. This satisfaction continued throughout the Ford (1974-1977) and the Carter (1977-1981) administrations until 1979. In the words of President Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'our present situation in the area is basically favorable, and realistically we would have no grounds to be dissatisfied if our position four years from now was essentially the same' (Foreign Relations of the United States February 1977).

4.4.1.2 Iran's status satisfaction

The Pahlavi regime was fundamentally ambitious, headed by power-hungry leaders who aimed to transform the country into a dominant force in the Middle East (Ansari 1998; Abrahamian 2008). This variable shows that Iran was not interested in reviewing the regional order or its position as a partner of the Western bloc. Nevertheless, it was a status-seeking actor because it wanted the surrogate's role that the United Kingdom was abandoning. Therefore, Iran perceived the UK's departure as an opportunity to improve its position within the system. Realizing it had the endorsement from the United States, Iran behaved to promote its status, in the sense that it sought a leadership position without altering the overall Western-oriented order. That was possible because it interpreted that such desire matched the US's interests. Hence, it was not revisionist as there was no discrepancy between status aspiration and status ascription.

The Shah's regime rejected the communist model as detrimental to its modernization plans (Ansari 1998). Besides, a history of conflict and tensions between Iranians and the Russians pushed the country towards the West. As the identity variable further discusses, Iran based their ambitions on Iran's ancient history, an intellectual and cultural cradle with a considerable value for humankind. For the Pahlavis, Iran was a natural regional powerhouse, 'destined for greatness' (Cooper 2012, p. 60). Iran seemed to be 'engaged in an endless and restless search for glory and status' (Petersen 2011, p. 89). This status-seeking behavior had two core manifestations. First, Iran linked itself with the West via a narrative of similar values and modernization goals. It presented itself as a token of anti-communism and development in the Middle East (Petersen 2011, p. 92). In the Shah's words:

‘In 20 or 25 years, I want it [Iran] to be ahead of the greatest nations in the world, we will have 60 million people in 25 years. With that number of people, we can be the most advanced country and do better than any other country (Cooper 2012, p. 138).

‘If all our efforts continue as at present, and if no foreseeable situation outside our control arises, we shall construct during the next 12 years a solid industrial, agricultural and technological substructure for the country’s development and will reach the present level of progress of Western Europe’ (Ansari 1998, p. 341).

Second, it sought status by promoting a qualitative differentiation between Iran and the Arab countries. It believed its neighboring countries were too vulnerable and incapable of guaranteeing stability after the British withdrawal (Saikal 2019, pp. 36–39). As the changeable power showed, the Shah had international prestige, capitalizing on that for his ambitions. In international meetings, he would argue that Iran’s neighbors were vulnerable to Soviet influence and, for that matter, he needed Western military support to protect the neighborhood (al-Saud 2003, p. 30; Fain 2008, p. 175). Only then could Iran rise to the occasion, replace the British, and act as a stability guarantor.

In a nutshell, Iran’s ambition was to be the new Western bloc’s superintend in the Middle East (Abrahamian 2008; Kinch 2016). Considering it did not perceive a rejection of this ambition, Iran’s status-seeking behavior was promotional rather than revisionist. It aimed to improve its position without altering the order. Both London and Washington encouraged Iran to ‘find a local balance of power’ with other conservative actors to preserve stability (Fain 2008, p. 179). Thus, throughout the period, Iran improved relations with its neighbors and received the international support it ambitioned. Therefore, the decade represented a moment of environmental openness for Iran’s ambitions, improving its status among its status community.

According to Cooper (2012, p. 21), the Shah was ‘widely regarded [in the West] as a force of stability, a champion of progressive reform, and the bold leader.’ Especially during the Nixon presidency, Iran felt valued as a trustful US ally (Alvandi 2012, p. 348). The improved changeable power and the security ties with the United States drove Tehran to perceive that its ambitions were endorsed regionally and internationally. During official meetings and bilateral communications, Americans ensured the Shah that his opinions about the region were highly appreciated (Petersen 2011, p. 89; Cooper 2012, p. 139). Hence, by taking the lead position as the US’s partner in the Twin Pillar Diplomacy, Iran seemed to be heading towards regional leadership with few barriers to achieving its aspired status.

4.4.1.3 Saudi Arabia's status satisfaction

A memory of stronger enemies, tribes, and neighbors that conspired against the ruling dynasty permeated the Saudi Arabian political history (Long 1985, pp. 4–5; Riedel 2018, p. 19). Since its establishment in 1932, the Saudi regime has been acutely aware of its political, demographical, and military vulnerabilities compared to some of its neighbors (Nonemman 2005; Long 1985). It was far less ambitious than Iran or Iraq, with policies directed mainly toward domestic stability (Riedel 2018, p. 55). Moreover, they believed survival is best guaranteed through the auspices of stronger third parties that can maintain local order and a balance between regional actors (Al-Rasheed 2010; Gause 2011). Saudi Arabia was aware that, if invaded, they lacked the stable power elements to resist or fight back. Until the 1970s, the British guaranteed such protection by checking the rise of a hegemon (Petersen 2011; Peterson 2009). Hence, their departure boosted Saudi Arabia's anxiety toward the regional order.

A sense of environmental mistrust and fear of instability drove Saudi Arabia's ambitions toward the regional system. The Al Saud regime is built on a delicate arrangement that relies on the oil market and the dynastical commitment to conservative Islam. The regime's continuance is dependent on the steady income of the oil rents and its redistribution of the population (Brown 1999), and the protection of a conservative Islamic predominance in the Middle East (Al-Rasheed 1996). Thus, they worried that the Trucial States' independence could instigate an expansionist behavior in Iran or Iraq (Safran 1998). Simultaneously, they feared that hostile ideologies, particularly communism, could fill the power vacuum left by the British and endanger the order's continuity (Petersen 2011, pp. 98–100). Aware it could not promote regional order by itself and that Iran and Iraq were sources of instability, Saudi Arabia expected that a powerful actor, preferably extra-regional, would protect the status quo (Safran 1998, pp. 231–232).

Saudi Arabia perceived the proliferation of secular ideological projects' in the Middle East as menaces to the regional Islamic status quo and detrimental to Muslim unity. Therefore, they were against all the 'isms' that could threaten this religious predominance: communism, radical nationalism, Zionism, and Arabism (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 128; Eilts 2011, p. 233). In the Cold War context, that was another reason to idealize a position within the Western bloc, as it rejected the Soviet's godless communism. They promoted their conservative Islamism as an alternative to the pan-Arabism movement linked to Soviet secularism to regional audiences.

Interestingly, Kumar (2018, p. 1094) states that the Western media praised Saudi calls for Muslim solidarity, boosting their international prestige. Western leaders welcomed Saudi Islam as an ideological force against communism, frequently referring to the religious proximity between Christians and Muslims and their shared appreciation for stability (Bronson 2006, p. 76; Kumar 2018, p. 1087). Some US officials called the Saudi king the ‘Islamic pope’ (Bronson 2006, p. 75).

In other words, Saudi Arabia has been a status quo actor that depends on maintaining a Western-friendly and conservative regional order where an extra-regional actor checks the rise of a local hegemon (Niblock 2006; Aarts and van Duijne 2009; Gause 2011; Saikal 2016). This way, after the UK’s announcement, the Saudis hoped for the United States to assume the British role as regional protector (Kechichian 2008, p. 152). Without a traditional history of colonialism in the Middle East, the United States had more regional appeal than the British.¹⁷ Riyadh expected the United States to ‘play a more positive and helpful role’ and to ‘do more to support conservative and pro-Western forces’ (Foreign Relations of the United States November 21 / 1969). Therefore, the systemic change led to a replacement, in Saudi Arabia’s perspective, of whom should fill the order protector role.

As mentioned in the power section, the newly independent states’ decision to follow the monarchical model boosted Saudi Arabia's appeal while reducing its regional order anxiety as they did not fall prey to Iran or Iraq. Moreover, Riyadh’s anxiety significantly decreased as the United States authorized more weaponry to Saudi Arabia under the justification of protecting the conservative order. It perceived the US’s decision to include them in their new grand strategy (twin pillar diplomacy) as a gesture that Washington would not allow the Shah to threaten the weaker monarchies. That opened space for improving relations with Iran (al-Saud 2003). Finally, the economic prosperity after 1973 worked in the kingdom’s interests not only by improving its importance to the Western economies but also by boosting its donations to Islamic institutions. By providing economic assistance to Muslim allies, Saudi Arabia aimed to ensure compliance with the conservative status quo (Bowman 2005, p. 95; Kechichian 2008, p. 170).

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia wanted to be seen as a promoter and guardian of the Islamic faith and a Western partner. Therefore, it did not compete for regional supremacy with other

¹⁷ Local rules constantly condemned the British presence in the region as colonial and highly problematic, especially after the Suez crisis and the Buraimi dispute Petersen 2011, pp. 51–53.

actors or antagonize the pro-Western order. In short, Saudi Arabia was satisfied with its status quo in the Persian Gulf as long as the United States checked the emergence of any regional hegemon and communism, socialism, or other un-Islamic ideologies. During the selected period, by perceiving that Iran and the United States were willing to cooperate to preserve the status quo, Saudi Arabia's anxiety towards the regional order lowered.

4.4.2 Second intervening variable: regime identity

- It is the cognitive variable referring to a regime's self-perceived images.
- It provides self-schemas for coping with behavior complexity.
- It narrows the band of possibilities of action.

4.4.2.1 US's regime identity

The political elite develops self-schemas to cope with the massive amount of daily information. Such schemas filter out options that do not correspond with the image a country sees of itself. The identity variable reveals that some foreign policy options are rejected due to how a country sees itself. The US's identity is the only intervening variable kept constant throughout the four periods analyzed in this thesis. That is because the United States has a stable political ethos based on liberal exceptionalism and limited liability. This identity establishes that the country's international cognitive function is to promote liberal values as a model to be emulated or a project to be imposed. Thus, the US identity has an ideational project, meaning its self-image promotes normative roles that aim to shape other actors' behavior. As the following paragraphs show, liberal exceptionalism and limited liability combine to form four different cognitive lenses from which the FPE can interpret this identity.

The foundational American myth is based on the idea that the first settlers had a predestined mission in the 'city upon the hill,' where they would found a 'New World' in opposition to the old European world (Dueck 2006, p. 22). The first Calvinist immigrants believed God separated them from the corrupt European monarchs and gave them the purpose of creating a better, more equal society (Oren 2007). Their physical isolation from Europe was a virtue that enabled them to emphasize individual freedom and puritan principles in contrast to European militarism, autocracy, war, and secret alliances. This sense of moral superiority inspired the founding fathers in their independence process from the British (Kinch 2016, p. 75). Their political mindset mixed moral superiority with enlightenment ideas about human nature's

constancy and Lockean liberal assumptions about freedom, individuality, and property (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Oren 2007). The US Constitution and the Bill of Rights reflect these philosophies, projecting the country's political experiment as qualitatively superior to others.

However, many founding fathers were skeptical about the US's ability to trigger political change abroad and feared external actors could corrupt their model (Monten 2005, p. 115). Figures like Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, distrusting aristocratic and imperialistic costumes, preferred a limited government with diminished foreign ties or commitments abroad (Oren 2007). They saw their distance from the world politics' center as a strategic advantage to focus on domestic politics. Dueck (2006, p. 26) calls limited liability this preference for political seclusion. For much of its history, the United States thrived under the insular mentality of avoiding prolonged engagement in international disputes (Kinch 2016, p. 87). This way, the identity's ideational character was limited to being a model, an example of liberal democracy for others to emulate. In other words, the political experiment's success should influence others via the 'sheer force of example' (Monten 2005, p. 129).

However, the strategy of projecting liberal exceptionalism as an example was first challenged in the 1890s. After the Civil War, industrialization, modernization, and empowerment instigated a progressive reformist movement, which believed the United States should be an agent of change and actively expand its model into the world (Monten 2005, p. 137). Values of freedom, property, and morality were seen as a collective, something that should belong to the whole human race (Monten 2005, p. 122; Layne 2006, p. 32). The eagerness to protect the freedom, virtue, and morality of the 'civil man' everywhere led to a Manichean tendency. The United States is the protector of all the good and righteous, whereas political enemies are the custodian of all that is corrupted and nefarious (Kinch 2016, pp. 79–80). Moreover, prosperity was seen as crucial to domestic political stability, which depended on overseas markets, investment opportunities, and raw materials (Williams 1972, p. 229). This way, a part of the US's regime advocated for an activist foreign behavior, in which exporting liberalism was a vindicative necessity.¹⁸

The US's massive power gathered during the Second World War enabled the country to unite capitalist prosperity with the exportation of the American model. Williams (1972) defines

¹⁸ Arguing that it was 'the white men's burden,' the United States had its own imperialism experience via Roosevelt's Big Stick doctrine, intervening in Latin America, Hawaii, and the Philippines.

this philosophy as one of ‘open-doors’ leadership, in which the United States would promote and protect capitalist economies to maintain global peace and prosperity. This way, the continuance of the American creed became intertwined with the distribution of power and the economic liberal model’s everlasting expansion (Layne 2006, p. 33). The open doors identity indicates the US’s preference for policies that maintained stability, prevented hostile actors’ empowerment, protected the free market, and supported friendly governments (Layne 2006; Kinch 2016). Enemies are detected when these values are opposed, denied access, or rejected. The Manichean tendency of this identity leads to framing enemies as the ‘worst evil,’ as the United States is the ‘greater good.’

Finally, Dueck (2006, pp. 31–35) identifies four cognitive filters that respond to the duality between limited liability and liberal exceptionalism. A leader can assume the identity via an *internationalist* lens, in which the commitment to expanding liberalism is high while the sense of limited liability is low. Thus, they favor an interfering behavior in opening markets and international institutions. The opposing lens is the *nationalist*, with weak expansionist commitment and high limited liability. This lens is dubious about international intervention, reluctant towards globalization, and skeptical of overseas endeavors. *Progressives* are committed to liberal exceptionalism and limit liability, promoting a liberal international order through peaceful means and diplomacy rather than force. Finally, *realists* are unconvincingly devoted to exceptionalism and liability, cynical about democracy-promotion abroad, while recognizing that some level of internationalization can help pursue strategic interests.

The US’s leaders find ways to mix and match these cognitive lenses to define their strategies. As the FPE further discusses in this chapter, President Nixon and President Ford were straightforward realists, skeptical about the exportation of US values worldwide and prioritizing policies that distanced the country from international conundrums that did not relate directly to national interests. On the other hand, President Carter was linked to progressivism and internationalism, as he campaigned under a narrative of reconciliation with the Soviet Union and protection of Human Rights worldwide. Notwithstanding, during the selected period, Carter showed pragmatism, giving continuity to Nixon's realist policies for the Persian Gulf.

4.4.2.2 Iran’s regime identity

Iran’s political history can be traced back to the VI century BC, when the first dynasty ruled the Persian Empire. A series of dynasties, successions, coups, and foreign interventions

permeated Iranian collective memory. The last dynasty was the Pahlavis (1925-1979), whose regime identity was based on territorial, historical, and ethnic particularities that translated into a sense of Iranian superiority or *Iranianess*. In addition, the cultural heritage and a deep nostalgia for a period of grandeur gave the regime a sense of qualitative differentiation from the others in the Middle East. Hence, Iran sustained that it had the natural right to be a regional leader due to its history, autonomy, political-military superiority, and cultural preeminence (Kinch 2016).

The Pahlavi dynasty was installed after a military coup in 1925 that overthrew the young Qajar king Ahmad Shan and put in power the general of the Persian Cossack Brigade, Reza Khan. The regime consolidated under ideas of military order, strength, and modernization. He also downgraded the Qajar regime's Islamic character, which was seen as retrograde (Ansari 2001). Instead, the regime employed a nostalgic narrative concerning the pre-Islamic times, notably the First Empire of Cyrus the Great, around 550 BC (Ansari 1998; Abrahamian 2008). One of the largest empires in history, stretching from the European Balkan peninsula toward the West of the Indian Indus valley, the Persian Empire is considered one of the first global superpowers (Kashani-Sabet 2002). It was a hub for culture, religion, art, technology, and science, hosting many trading routes, like the Silk Road, and assimilating on the way many rich and diverse cultural backgrounds (Takeyh 2009, p. 153). Allegedly, Cyrus was the first to use the term 'Iran;' in 1935, Reza Pahlavi altered the country's name from Persia to Iran (Kinch 2016, p. 26).

The ontological distinction of what it meant to be Iranian emanated partially from geospatial definitions. The regime deemed Iran exceptional due to its territory continuity, history, language, and ethnicity. Under this narrative, Iranians belonged to a unique ethnic-linguistic group, the 'Great Civilization,' with more than 2,500 years of glory and pride that differentiated them from other Arabs neighbors (Kinch 2016, p. 26). Unlike them, Iranians were not colonized, and its political center has had relatively the same size since the Empire (Kinch 2016, p. 26). In their collective memory, regardless of who had the country's political control, the Iranian nation's territory has a historical continuity (Kashani-Sabet 2002). To Adib-Moghaddam (2006, pp. 17–18), the Pahlavi regime romanticized the narrative of belonging to the Aryan nation to stress their connections with the Europeans. Additionally, Iranianess emphasized Iran's Indo-European heritage and the shared roots between Persian and some European languages, explicitly using those to distinguish themselves from their Arabic

neighbors. They aimed to detach themselves from other Semitic or Arabic cultures and retain a separate identity that did not mingle well across the region and was closer to the West (Kinch 2016, p. 33).

Beyond Iranianess, a deep desire for independentism and self-reliance also codified the regime identity (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, pp. 154–155). Foreign interference played a central role in the dynasty's political ethos, particularly during World War II. According to Kinch (2016, p. 33), international meddling created a mass psychological yearning for self-reliance and autonomy among Iranians. Despite wanting to be linked with Western modernization and industrialization patterns, the country's elite was frequently suspicious of external actors (Takeyh 2009, p. 2).s a result, a deep sense of independentism was ingrained in the Iranian identity, which served to push for military empowerment as a way to defend the country.

International pressure forced Reza Khan to abdicate the rule to his son, Mohammad Pahlavi, in 1941. Shah Pahlavi continued his father's militarization, aggrandizement, and modernization projects. In 1953, he stirred a state coup that overthrew the nationalist Prime Minister Mossadegh with US's and UK's assistance. From then on, he quickly centralized the power in his hands, transforming the regime into a one-man show (Abrahamian 2008; Alvandi 2010). A militarist, bold, independentist, and chauvinist identity shaped the Iranian foreign behavior during the period. It projected itself as a superior leader, destined to become a regional powerhouse, independent, and exceptional. Thus, this variable filters out policies that could reduce Iran's sense of regional superiority or independence or that could put it in a position that diminishes its influence.

4.4.2.3 Saudi Arabia's regime identity

The state of Saudi Arabia was not built under the flag of collectivism or nationalism. Instead, King Abdulaziz unified the Arabs in the peninsula through coercion, co-option, and dominance of his tribe over the others (Long 2009, p. 403; Partrick 2016). His success is profoundly connected with his alliance with the Wahhabist clerics from the Najd province, which provided tools to overpower other tribes and exert domination (Al-Rasheed 2010, pp. 2–3). The state-building process relied on this religious-political alliance, legitimizing the dynasty's rule over an amalgam of tribes that did not share national bounds. Hence, what makes a person Saudi Arabian is territorial belonging, tribal ancestral, and Wahhabi affiliation.

Furthermore, the king's most crucial duty is to protect the religion within these territorial bounds and beyond.

Abdulaziz pledged alliance to Wahhabism, an Islamic doctrine initiated in Najd by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who was displeased with the evolution of the Islamic societies' relationship with the political elites in the eighteenth century (DeLong-Bas 2004, pp. 17–20). Located in the peninsula's heartland and surrounded by vast sand seas of difficult access, Najd is probably one of the 'last regions in the old world to open up to the rest of the globe' (AlOboudi 2015, p. 282). It is composed of small emirates that mainly were left alone to govern themselves and were often threatened by more vigorous rulers from al-Hijaz or al-Hasa (AlOboudi 2015, p. 283). Consequently, those in the region developed an encirclement syndrome, meaning an insular awareness of being surrounded by enemies and menaces (Long 1985, pp. 4–8).

Wahhabism stressed the necessity to return to beliefs and early practices, calling for a reform that rejected any procedure not based on the Qur'an or the Sunnah (Niblock 2006, p. 20; Blanchard 2008). Most importantly for the analysis, Wahhabism called for the political authorities to protect and promote the religion (Niblock 2006, p. 19). By tapping on a political-religious alliance with Wahhabism, the Al Saud family found a justification for its rule over other tribes: to fulfill the duty to protect the faith. This movement ensued a growing allegiance of Wahhabis to the dynasty, resulting in the eventual incorporation of Hijaz, Hasa, and 'Asir to Najd. Hence, Wahabism provided Abdulaziz with a rationale for the political domination of other tribes (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 59). Thus, the rule became intrinsically linked to religion. Islam, not nationalism, became the primary shared cognitive marker of the state (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 6).

This sect prescribes a return to Islam's puritan version, being highly critical of innovations within practices and traditions as well as foreign ideologies (DeLong-Bas 2004; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 209). Najd's costumes and values were spread throughout the country, and Riyadh's *ulamma* retained control of the citizens' daily lives, making the religion the central element of social unification (Nonemman 2005, p. 320; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 73). It is key to stress that Wahhabism is critical to divisions within Islam (particularly Shiism, syncretism, or polytheism) because they harm Islam's unitarian vision (Niblock 2006; Blanchard 2008, p. 3;

Al-Rasheed 2010). Thus, for not approving these divisions, the Saudi identity has sectarian tendencies.

Finally, Saudi Arabia promotes a leadership position among the Muslim community due to its unique Islamic attributes (Bronson 2006, pp. 14–15; Kechichian 2008, p. 111). The then-only country ruled by the Sharia, Saudi Arabi is the home of Mecca and Medina and host of the *Hajj*. These characteristics, which are changeable power elements, shaped a mission of protecting Islam, internally and worldwide (Fürtig 2002, p. 222; Darwich 2014, p. 14). Riyadh saw itself committed to protecting the concerns and beliefs of the *ummah* from threatening ideologies. For them, it is a divine prerogative to preserve the Islamic heritage and cherish the responsibilities of being where millions of people direct their daily prayers (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 7). Thus, its policy is coupled with the cognitive function of projecting Saudi Arabia as a protector of Islam. For this motivation, monarchs avoided the sectarian tendency during the selected period, relying on pan-Islamic rhetoric as a way to project spiritual leadership (Jones 2010, p. 220; Darwich 2014, p. 2).

In conclusion, the Najd tribal experience, the encirclement syndrome, and Wahhabism's conservatism push for an identity that is aware of the different types of threats that can harm the dynastical rule. For them, regional order is the space for protecting and projecting a conservative Islam. Saudi Arabia assumed that interventionist actors, revisionist ideologies, or secularist political projects were at the same time political adversaries and ontological threats to the regime. This variable indicates that Saudi Arabia focused on safeguarding and mitigating conflicts among the Islamic *ummah* (Nonemman 2005, p. 320; Darwich 2014). In the thesis' explanative chain, it shows a preference for policies that fostered its role as a religious leader while avoiding measures that endangered the conservative order.

4.4.3 Third intervening variable: foreign policy executives

- It is the agency variable, indicating leaders' tendencies and preferences regarding foreign policy.
- It describes how those in charge of foreign policy perceive the systemic environment, which interpretative lenses for the regime identity they employ and what are their political inclinations.
- It tilts the country's international behavior in the direction of the FPE's worldviews.

4.4.3.1 US's foreign policy executives

This variable shows how those in power assessed the systemic inputs according to their own preferences and interpretations, tilting strategies' direction. Throughout the period, the United States had three presidents: republican Richard Nixon (1969-1974), republican Gerard Ford (1974-1977), and democrat Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). The following paragraphs reveal that the presidents shared a similar grasp of which strategy to follow in the Persian Gulf. They understood that the region was growingly crucial to the capitalist economy and, for that reason, should be protected from Soviet influence. Nixon's administration believed the environment allowed for a surrogate policy via local actors, which was in line with his realist worldview. Consequently, he elaborated the Twin Pillar diplomacy, which Carter gave continuity.

Nixon and his chief foreign policy advisor, Henry Kissinger, were notorious realists who believed that strategic interests rather than ideologies should define the international agenda (Caldwell 2009, p. 635; Alvandi 2012, p. 337). A Navy and Marine Corps decorated, Nixon became a congressman in the 1940s, later rising to the vice presidency during the Eisenhower administration. Nixon preferred bold actions and believed he had the political experience to put the international system on a new footing (Petersen 2011, p. 2). He and Kissinger wanted to remove the country from conundrums such as Vietnam, as they did not concern with core national interests (Caldwell 2009, p. 635). Their focus was to better respond to an emerging tripolar power configuration with URSS and China. Additionally, Nixon and Kissinger were preoccupied with self-promotion and wanted to be regarded as foresightful men (Petersen 2011, p. 1). Reorientating foreign behavior through Realpolitik was, then, their anticipated legacy.

The administration distanced itself from idealistic cognitive lenses, and the principles of limited liability were more influential than exporting liberalism. They saw that excessive involvement in non-crucial regions could damage the US's power projection. Thus, they aimed to tone down the Cold War's ideological confrontation and reduce their involvement in second-tier conflicts. To Nixon, Third World's conflicts were an unwanted distraction from his goals of seeking détente with the Soviet Union and building leverage with China (Caldwell 2009, pp. 646–647). In his words, 'as much as we like our own political system, American style democracy is not necessarily the best form of government for people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with entirely different backgrounds' (Foreign Relations of the United States July 29 / 1967).

What became known as the Nixon Doctrine centered on reducing direct international commitment while not lessening global influence. Nixon advised Kissinger to ‘not waste time on the Third World, as what happens in those parts of the world is not, in the final analysis, going to have any significant effect on the success of our foreign policy in the foreseeable future’ (Foreign Relations of the United States 1970). In Kissinger's words, ‘internal subversion has to be the primary responsibility of the threatened country. The United States stands ready to supply material assistance, advice, and technical assistance where that is requested and where our interests so dictate’ (Foreign Relations of the United States October 20 / 1969). This way, Washington should aim for ‘devolutions of power,’ meaning the development of ‘self-reliant regional and sub-regional groupings’ that reduced the ‘burden of maintaining a modicum of order and stability in the world’ (Nixon 1969). The United States would encourage and assist ‘regional guardians of security’ to keep the Western interests protected.

The British decision to leave the Persian Gulf opened an opportunity for implementing the Nixon Doctrine there, as the administration refused to substitute the UK (Petersen 2011). Hence, it was necessary to search for a local actor capable of such a role, a new surrogate actor. They understood that while developing a new strategy was vital, the environment was not alarmingly vulnerable. A document from the National Security Council stated that ‘we look to enlightened leadership from Shah, Faisal, and other leaders,’ and that the ‘US can only play a complementary role. Primary reliance will have to be on indigenous leadership’ (Foreign Relations of the United States February 20 / 1970). Hence, they calculated that improving ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia was the ultimate outcome.

‘The spread of radicalism in the Gulf would alter the balance within the Arab world and aggravate the Arab-Israeli conflict. Soviet political penetration would affect the East-West geopolitical balance. Our friendly relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia are the mainstay of our influence in the area. The US has communications and intelligence facilities in Iran and overflight and landing privileges in Iran and Saudi Arabia which provide an air corridor to South and Southeast Asia’ (Foreign Relations of the United States June 1970).

The administration believed that Iran was crucial for tackling instability in the Middle East. They assessed that ‘unless we remain Iran’s principal military supplier, our interests in Iran, including our ability to maintain our own strategic interests there and to influence the Shah in the direction of constructive foreign and domestic policies, will be seriously weakened’ (Foreign Relations of the United States January 30 / 1969). Moreover, Nixon had a notorious friendship with the Shah (Bill 1998, p. 201; Alvandi 2012, p. 348). In his memories, Nixon

recalls that he ‘sensed an inner strength in him [the Shah], and I felt that in the years to come, he would become a strong leader’ (Nixon 1978). He remarked he wished ‘there were a few more leaders around the world with his foresight’ (Foreign Relations of the United States April 1971). As the dependent variable shows, Nixon invited the Shah frequently to discuss the Middle East and met most of Iran’s military assistance demands.

However, their close relations did not blind the US’s FPE to fully appraise how other countries in the region perceived the Shah. On White House documents, it is visible that, even recognizing Iran as the stouter power, the FPE detected possible drawbacks if they disregarded the general suspicion towards Iran. In a ministerial meeting, policymakers stressed that ‘Arabs could say that the whole thing was an Anglo-Iranian plot to substitute Iranian influence for British influence on the Arabian side of the Gulf’ (Foreign Relations of the United States March 1969). In other words, the administration realized that Iran did not have all the features required to assume an uncontested leadership position. According to a CIA memorandum:

‘Singly or in tandem, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been touted as candidates to fill the vacuum left by the British. If military power were the sole prerequisite of leadership, Iran could provide a Pax Persica, but the Shah is embroiled in disputes with Kuwait and Iraq at the head of the Gulf and Abu Dhabi down the coast. Cultural and historical differences are added impediments to the exercise of leadership by Iran. Saudi Arabia seems precluded from the role of protector for many of the same reasons, although it does have a good deal of influence with the ruling families in Bahrain and Qatar’ (Foreign Relations of the United States September 21 / 1972).

Therefore, the FPE chose a strategy that included Saudi Arabia and Iran, arguing that both should play ‘a statesmanlike and constructive role in the Gulf’ (Foreign Relations of the United States April 1969b). They saw it as strategically unwise to strain relations with Saudi Arabia, considering that it was a leading oil producer and a firm voice against communism (McGlinchey 2012, p. 847). Moreover, they understood that having Iran as a single security instrument could increase local’s anxiety. Iran did not share the necessary bonds with the Arab and Sunni countries to develop a regional security arrangement alone. A US’s ambassador in Tehran argued that ‘Arabs feel that Iranians in general and the Shah, in particular, are so contemptuous of them and are so arrogant in their dealings with them that true cooperation probably is not possible’ (Foreign Relations of the United States October 20 / 1969). In a letter to Nixon, Kissinger recommended ‘promoting Saudi-Iranian cooperation while recognizing Iran’s preponderant power’ (Foreign Relations of the United States October 22 / 1970).

‘US and Iranian foreign policy interests have coincided in recent years and as our aid and tutelage phased out a close relationship as equal partners has evolved. We have encouraged Shah to play constructive leadership role in regional affairs and in Gulf

Iranian actions seem almost classic case of Nixon Doctrine in action. However, we should continue to seek ways to encourage Saudi Arabia to play more active regional role so Iran's increasing predominance does not overwhelm and frighten other littoral states' (Foreign Relations of the United States Jun 26 / 1974).

In short, they wanted to keep the Persian Gulf safe from Soviet influence and maintain close ties with increasingly powerful Iran while treasuring the Saudi Arabian regional role and stimulating greater cooperation between Tehran and Riyadh. Nixon's second term was cut short with his resignation in August 1974. Vice President Ford assumed the position until January 1977. Considering the domestic political scenario after the resignation and the need to keep the republican party a flow, Ford did not focus much on foreign policy and gave continuity to the Nixon Doctrine (Yetiv 2008, p. 35). He kept Kissinger as a key foreign advisor, maintaining the realist strategy. That meant the leading international political goals were continuing the détente with the Soviets and the rapprochement with China.

In 1978, the democrat Jimmy Carter was elected. Georgia's former governor became known for his activism for civil rights, showcasing a liberal exemplary discourse. To Kinch (2016, p. 106), his election was 'evidence of America's dissatisfaction with Vietnam's failure and the moral weakness of the Nixon/Ford administration.' He adopted progressive lenses for interpreting the US's identity, meaning that he was committed to promoting the country as a political model worldwide via diplomacy and economic openness. Progressives are linked with the idea that liberalism, individualism, and capitalism are genuinely better than other political models out there. In this sense, he aimed to move away from Nixon and Kissinger's Realpolitik, arguing for a more moralist international stance. Carter also had an internationalist tendency, which led him to believe that the United States should, whenever possible, act as the protector of the order and intervene in solving conflicts (Dueck 2006, p. 32). During his campaign, he promised to pursue a foreign policy that viewed 'as possible not only coexistence with the Soviets but also the development of a sense of global community' (Yetiv 2008, p. 35).

Nevertheless, balancing against the Soviets and containing their influence in strategic regions such as the Persian Gulf continued to be the main priority (Dueck 2006; Yetiv 2008). Carter's key advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, warned against pressuring Middle East countries, particularly Iran, for democratic reforms, as that could be detrimental to the US's strategic interests (Seliktar 2012, p. 8). While showing less sympathy for the Shah than Nixon, Carter gave continuity to the Nixon Doctrine and balance the Soviets through reliable regional partners (Zanchetta 2009, p. 14). While the president seemed not satisfied with the region's low human

rights standards, that did not echo in the US-Iran or US-Saudi Arabia relationships. To the Crown Prince Fahd, Carter said he did ‘not believe there are any other nations with whom we have had better friendship and a deeper sense of cooperation than we have found in Saudi Arabia’ (Bowman 2005, p. 95). He called Iran an ‘island of stability in one of the more troubled areas in the world’ just two years before the revolution (Seliktar 2012, p. 9).

In conclusion, the three presidents agreed on a political strategy that guaranteed stability without direct involvement despite different worldviews and preferences. Both the Republican realists and the Democrat moralists were not interested in damaging good ties with Iran by challenging the Shah's growing authoritarianism. For example, Carter, hosting Pahlavi during a visit, said that the US’s ‘national interest [is] to support the Shah so he would continue to play a constructive role in regional affairs,’ ignoring the Iranians protesting against the regime in front of the White House (Bill 1998, p. 226).¹⁹ However, the 1979 Revolution abruptly changed Carter’s understanding of Persian Gulf security, driving to the development of a much more intrusive strategy to correspond to power distribution changes, the next chapter’s topic.

4.4.3.2 Iranian foreign policy executives

After the 1953 coup, the Shah quickly concentrated the power in his hands, creating a political system so personalistic that it is hard to separate where the status and identity variables end and where the FPE begins. Pahlavi saw himself as the state, encouraging sycophancy and servility from the small political elite and the bureaucracy (Bill 1998, p. 195). His management skills were problematic as he distrusted people around him and refused to delegate duties to subordinates (Cooper 2012, p. 118). Moreover, often stating ‘I am the army,’ he handpicked military leaders, ruled on military decisions, and handed high-ranking positions to close friends (Bill 1998, p. 196). Hence, there is not much filter exercise within the FPE variable in this period. While the status variable showed a promotional behavior, the Shah also wanted to boost his own image's aggrandizement. While the regime identity variable disclosed a self-image thriving on Iranianess and nostalgia for the Persian Empire, he also subscribed to this idea of superiority and talked fondly about ancient times. In other words, he blended personal goals

¹⁹ On 15 November 1976, opponents and supporters of the Shah clashed in front of the White House, with many policeman and demonstrations injured and tear gas was used, reaching the president, the Shah and their wives, which had to abruptly shorten their speeches due to ‘air pollution’.

with national objectives in a constant sought for prestige, Western proximity, and hegemonic leadership.

Mohammad Pahlavi became Shah at the age of 22 after an Anglo-Soviet coalition invaded Iran in 1941 and forced his father out of power. He was a Western-educated, eloquent man, notably famous for his diplomatic skills (Cooper 2012, pp. 44–50). The Shah strongly subscribed to Iranianess and often praised the Persian Empire's grandiosity and glory: he wanted to be seen as an heir of those glorious times (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, pp. 155–157). He believed Iran was entitled to regional leadership due to its military power and long-lasting imperial history. In an interview, he said to be ‘convinced that a return to the Aryan path alone can save humanity from a world escalating towards war, decadence and doom’ (Karanjia 1997, p. 261). The Shah saw himself as the ‘enlightened one who could see social ills and how to correct them’ (Heisey and Trebing 1983, p. 166). This way, he promoted himself as the one that would bring Iran back to the path of greatness it deserved.

The Shah linked international prestige with social-economic modernization in the Western molds. Under his view, the path was through industrialization, inserting Iran to the select group of so-called great powers. He wanted Iran to be ‘one of the leading industrial countries which would achieve an enlightened social order’ (Heisey and Trebing 1983, p. 166). When asked how he saw Iran in the next decade, the Shah answered, ‘in the next twenty-five years – that is, within a single generation – we shall rank among the five biggest powers’ (Karanjia 1997, p. 243). It is important to stress that for both Pahlavi leaders, capitalist modernization was crucial to empower Iran (Ansari 1998, p. 230). However, Mohammad was much more incisive than his father when showing his preference toward the West. He dismissed socialism as inferior and praised the advantages of capitalist liberalism (Bill 1998, p. 193).

Therefore, he interpreted the British withdrawal as an opportunity to seek a more significant position among Western countries and demand assistance on modernization. He demanded security assistance so that Iran could become the new surrogate power and guarantee the regional order. In his words, most region countries were ‘simply not ready for the added responsibility that would befall them’ (Foreign Relations of the United States April 1969a). In his view, the security of a Western-prone order in the Persian Gulf depended on a continuous upgrade and expansion of Iranian military forces (Petersen 2011, p. 81).

‘the Shah is convinced that Iran must play the dominant role in the Persian Gulf and he is determined that radical Arab or Soviet influence should be prevented, or at least be

kept to an innocuous level. He feels that neither Saudi Arabia nor the various principalities can contribute significantly to the control of these subversive forces and that therefore, the entire burden of ensuring the region's security will fall on Iran as the strongest and most stable riparian power. To meet this burden, Iran, in the Shah's opinion, will require a modern and well-equipped military establishment with most of the equipment to be purchased either from the US or elsewhere (Foreign Relations of the United States October 17 / 1969).

An army man himself, the Shah wanted to be seen as the epitome of a militarized, robust, bold, and masculine leader (Ansari 1998, p. 302; Abrahamian 2008, p. 68). He connected prestige with a strong military and regularly organized events to display the naval, army, and air forces (Ward 2009). The Shah was acutely aware of the Nixon Doctrine's focus on reducing direct commitments and used it to his advantage. He often asked Nixon for arms procurements and assistance in training and capacitation (Petersen 2011, p. 82). In his words:

'rather than trying to treat all countries generally alike, the US and Iran should both try to develop an especially close and cooperative arrangement with countries that shared their basic political and international philosophy, and were in a position to work towards stabilising areas that today was in a precarious position' (Foreign Relations of the United States October 13 / 1969).

He also understood that more positive relations with Saudi Arabia would improve its prestige among the other Persian Gulf countries, assuring them under Western influence. Thus, the Shah expressed his interest in collaborative relations with Riyadh without denying that it would use unilateral force to secure order if necessary (Ansari 1998, p. 349). In 1969, he said he was willing to 'enter into an informal or a formal agreement or alliance' with the Saudis as the relationship was 'of great importance' to the regional order (Foreign Relations of the United States April 1969a). He argued that if Iran were granted better arms deals, it would be 'able to help [the] Saudis if required' (Alvandi 2010, p. 161). Additionally, the Shah often acknowledged Saudi Arabia's spiritual leadership within the region (Gause 1990, p. 69; Kechichian 2008, pp. 176–186). In this sense, he explored the Nixon Doctrine in his favor, linking his militarization goals with the US's interests in a Saudi-Iranian partnership for regional security.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the Shah was a very nationalist man and did not want his Western preference linked with submission. In some situations, he tested the partnership with Washington by demanding faster weapon negotiations or taking harder stands toward American oil companies (Petersen 2011, p. 53). In his words:

'if in the past we walked along the same path as the west, it was not because we were their camp followers. No, of course not. We believed in the philosophy of human freedom and liberal values, as the west does, and so we worked in cooperation with

them. Now let me return to this canard of Iran being ‘a western enclave’ in the Middle East. The answer is a categorical NO! I would say NEVER!’ (Karanjia 1997, p. 254)

Nevertheless, by the second half of the 1970s, most of the Shah’s opponents accused him of being a US’s pawn. The Western-style modernization heightened inequality, destabilized the economy, and soared poverty (Ansari 2001; Katouzian 2010, p. 36). Simultaneously, centralization of power rampant corruption and maladministration reached higher and higher levels (Bill 1998, p. 195; Cooper 2012, p. 118). In addition, oppression and persecution of free speech via the SAVAK secret police increased the restlessness among the population. Meanwhile, the Shah relished his new status as ‘one of the world’s most important statesmen,’ the ‘Imperator of Oil,’ according to Times magazine (Cooper 2012). Therefore, he grew detached from his population’s needs while leaving the administration and distribution of revenues suboptimal. Here are the foundations for the Iranian Revolution.

4.4.3.3 Saudi Arabian foreign policy executive

The monarchy is dynastical, and policies are made mostly under consensus within the family's higher ranks, with the king having the final word (Anderson 1991; Lucas 2004). The selected period covers King Faisal's reign (1964-1975) and King Khaled (1975-1982). Faisal is one of the most outstanding leaders of Saudi Arabia, known for his reform policies and consolidation of the political institutions (Kechichian 2008; Riedel 2018, pp. 27–57). In foreign policy, he balanced anti-communist and anti-Zionist preferences with a pragmatic and realist assessment of Saudi Arabian limitations to develop a strategy that prioritized stability. He defined a grand strategy of balancing the two strongest regional actors out with the US’s assistance, a strategy that continued until 2003, as the following three chapters show. Faisal set the tone for a grand strategy that promoted tactical alignment with the West, guaranteed the petrodollar's transfer to the welfare state, and protected the conservative status quo.

Faisal is Abdulaziz’s son and the third king of Saudi Arabia. At the age of thirteen, he started his political career as viceroy of Hijaz in 1926 and the first Foreign Affairs Minister already in 1930. By the time he became king, he was the ultimate regime insider, with an extensive tribal, regional, and international network. Kechichian (2008, p. 162) describes him as a ‘cohesive, cogent, and consistent’ leader. After the 1973 oil crisis, the rent incomes allowed the king to expand the state bureaucracy, allocate state functions among royals, and consolidate the welfare state system (Partrick 2016; Mabon 2016, pp. 80–81). By the mid-1970s, he

transformed the family into a corporate ruling group with internal unity (Gause 2018). To Riedel (2018, p. 56), Faisal was the ‘architect of modern Saudi Arabia.’ He shaped the ministerial structure, solidified a royal employment mechanism, and secured loyalty from tribal leaders.

The king’s upbringing was anchored firmly on Wahhabism, and he was known to be a very pious man (Riedel 2018, p. 31). He was also a staunch anti-Communist, anti-Zionist, and pro-Palestine (Kechichian 2008, p. 162). Faisal showed an ‘intense hatred of communism’ and a deep concern with its dissemination in the Middle East, saying that if communists were ‘given ten years of peace they will become so strong as to be undefeatable’ (Bowman 2005, p. 97). To him, communism’s secularism was the antithesis of what Saudi Arabia stood for. By offering economic assistance to other Muslim countries, the king consolidated for the country the function of promoting Islamic Solidarity worldwide as a way to guarantee their detachment from disruptive ideologies. It sponsored religious education and the construction of schools, praying centers, and mosques in poorer Muslim countries (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 128). Faisal was also a crucial contributor to the Islamic Solidarity Fund, and he co-founded the Muslim World League in 1962 and the Islamic Development Bank in 1975 (Kechichian 2008, p. 33).

It is essential to stress Faisal’s preference for pan-Islamism. He saw no logic in separating Islam from the Arabs and avoided sectarianism. For him, ‘those who disavow Islam and distort its call under the guise of nationalism are actually the most bitter enemies of Arabs, whose glories are entwined with the glories of Islam’ (Sindi 1980, p. 186). Moreover, pan-Islamism was a way to project Saudi Arabia as an alternative to secular Arabism and communism. For example, in Tehran for a visit, he talked about the ‘bond that united all Muslims’ and called for cooperation to defeat radicalism since ‘brotherhood and love are derived from the spiritual teachings of Islam’ and ‘Islam will remain a clear and straight path that needs no alteration or amendment’ (Kechichian 2008, p. 176). Thus, Islamic solidarity and a rejection of secular ideologies fostered its conservative model regionally (Safran 1998; Al-Rasheed 2010).

Anti-communism and fear of regional instability informed Faisal about the environmental restrictiveness after the British announced they were retreating. Faisal was aware that, without Western protection, the region could become susceptible to Soviet influence. He also worried about Iran’s bold attitude towards the region as well as Iraq’s closeness to the Soviets (Kechichian 2008, p. 162). According to Safran (1998, p. 213), Faisal had the

disposition to appease rather than resist a powerful opponent, wait for events to unfold before reacting, and avoid irreparable confrontation if a clash was inevitable. When it became clear that Washington would prioritize Iran to fill the power vacuum, Faisal concluded Saddam was the most significant regional threat due to his secular ideologies and hawkish discourse. Hence, Faisal decided to approach Iran in opposition to Iraq, reaching an understanding with the Shah 'based on a tacit division of spheres of influence that left the Gulf emirates in the Saudi sphere but allowed Iran to seize the Abu Musa and Tunb islands' (Safran 1998, p. 126).

In general, the ideational and cognitive variables oriented the king to believe its primary source of threats came from countries that challenged the country's Islamic role or projected revisionist ideologies that could disturb regional order. Faisal understood he could not translate Saudi Arabia's political and financial power into military clout in enough time to compete with Iran or Iraq for regional leadership. Therefore by engaging with the stronger status quo actor in combination with the United States, the king hoped to 'essentially count on Iran to check Iraq, and on the United States to check Iran' (Safran 1998, p. 178). Aware that the state lacked the power elements to compete with the other two regional actors, Faisal established a strategy in which the Saudi Arabian policy tilted in the less ideologically threatening actor direction. Hence, Faisal was interested in improving ties with Iran during the period (Riedel 2018, p. 52).

Faisal's pragmatism also drove the improvement of ties with the United States. His predilection for Pan-Islamism and defense of the Palestinian cause made him a staunch critic of Israel, arguing that Zionism was a partner of communism, making his 'life quest to end the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem' (Riedel 2018, p. 50). Since the beginning of his rule, Faisal pushed Washington to find a more balanced approach to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict (Bronson 2006, p. 99; Al-Rasheed 2010, pp. 128–129). Nevertheless, he was pragmatic and far-sighted when accessing options throughout the 1970s. Understanding the need to modernize the army for better regional and domestic security, he sought to improve relations with the United States and gradually separated the ties from his critiques of Israel (Riedel 2018, p. 53).

A revengeful cousin assassinated Faisal in 1974, and his brother Khaled assumed the throne. Safran (1998, p. 219) argues that Khaled kept his brother's policy until 1979. Khaled was the viceroy of the Hijaz, served the army, and was the minister of interior. Hence, he also had political experience and prestige among the family (Riedel 2018, p. 58). However, he suffered from heart problems, and, after the second surgery in 1978, his brother, Crown Prince

Fahd, assumed a prominent role, especially when it came to foreign policy (Hoagl 1982). Throughout the rest of the selected period, both the king and crown prince continued to expand the economy, social programs, and education while stressing conservatism (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 238).

King Faisal shaped Saudi Arabian broad domestic and international policies. He inserted into Saudi Arabia's international relations predilections an idea of 'wait and see politics,' which meant that Riyadh would avoid taking a proactive stand in regional conundrums, waiting for a complete understanding of what the US's intent was and who was the more significant threat to regional stability, Iran or Iraq. Moreover, his centralization of power via oil rent distribution resulted in remarkable successes in political stabilization (Safran 1998, pp. 113–114). After his death, Khaled and Fahd followed the orientation, benefiting from the Twin Pillar Diplomacy.

4.5 The dependent variable

As discussed in the second chapter, most authors classified the British departure as the beginning of the Persian Gulf system. The event prompted the Trucial States' independence and interconnected most local actors' security agendas, especially after the growing global importance of oil in the first half of the 1970s. Moreover, it forced the United States to develop a strategy specifically for the region, as, until then, it relied on the UK's surrogate role to guarantee the Western interests there. President Nixon chose a strategy that became known as the Twin Pillar Diplomacy, in which the United States improved the security of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which, in their turn, guaranteed a Western-friendly regional order. The intervening variables demonstrated the countries' grand strategy assessment that put them in triangulation, adding explanative value and nuance to the investigation. This section presents the triangle's features and its tendency: the cooperation for a conservative regional order.

The 1969-1979 triangle was a 'ménage à trois,' in the sense that the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran shared positive relations. The status variable showed a congruence of all actors' ambitions after 1969: they expected the order to continue Western-oriented and free from Soviet interference. They also shared a perceived threat, Iraq, due to its ties with the Soviet Union. Washington wanted to promote the collaboration between the two status quo countries and guarantee stability without putting its feet on the ground. It did not perceive Tehran's status-seeking behavior as disruptive because it aimed to substitute the UK's surrogate role, not challenging the order. In its turn, Riyadh, aware of its inherent vulnerabilities, anticipated the

protection of the United States. When the US's preference became clear, Saudi Arabia turned towards Iran to collaborate against Iraq. Hence, there was no status competition between the three actors: they aspired for different hierarchical positions that were not mutually exclusive.

The FPE revealed that the Shah understood the Nixon Doctrine as an opportunity to require military procurements and become the West's primary security partnership in the region. However, the US's policymakers, which were not interested in replacing the British, detected that Iran lacked changeable power elements, such as regional appeal or partnerships. They were aware that Iran, a Persian, Shia, and potentially expansionist actor, provoked suspicions among the Saudis and the smaller monarchies. That led to Saudi Arabia's inclusion in their regional strategy, despite Iran being a much stronger actor. In his turn, King Faisal's pragmatism and diplomatic preferences drove the country towards engagement with Iran under the US' auspices, as they believed Washington could control the Shah's behavior while checking the most prominent regional threat, Iraq.

In this sense, environmental assessment and shared interests led to a moment in which, despite diverging regime identities, there was no ontological insecurity emanating from either of them, which allowed for more pragmatic relations. Of course, one cannot say that the Iranian identity (Iranianess superiority) was complementary to the Saudi one (conservative Islamist), nor that the Saudi one harmonized with the American (liberal exceptionalism). Nevertheless, a scenario of mutual goals allowed these identities to co-exist, not superposing each other, thus, not producing cognitive anxieties. In a meeting with Prince Fahd, Nixon said he looked to the Middle East as a battleground between 'forces of stability against extremism and those headed for revolution and destruction' (Foreign Relations of the United States October 14 / 1969). Both Faisal and the Shah seemed to agree. seeing themselves within the 'forces of stability.'

Therefore, the triangle's tendency was the collaboration to guarantee the regional conservative order. In this triangle, Iran was the US's leading partner for security, while Saudi Arabia gave the partnership more regional legitimacy due to its enhanced changeable power. Tehran provided Washington with irreplaceable intelligence facilities and a secure air corridor between Europe and Southeast Asia. In the US's view, Iran was the perfect candidate for the local partnership the Nixon Doctrine required. Kissinger even told Nixon that they needed to 'meet the Shah's desires' as Iran was 'the dominant military power there,' and it should

‘shoulder its responsibilities in this part of the world without having to be dependent on the US or other great power intervention’ (Foreign Relations of the United States April 29 / 1969).

In its turn, Iran saw in the Nixon Doctrine the momentum to seek a better regional and international position. During conversations with US officials, Pahlavi insisted that developing its military capabilities was necessary to become a gendarme against communism within the Middle East. For example, Foreign Minister Zahedi said that ‘they could move quickly and deal with the situation before outside powers such as the Soviet Union became involved’ and that Iran would ‘gladly act in this manner if it possessed the requisite military strength’ (Foreign Relations of the United States May 15/ 1970). In a meeting, Kissinger asked the Shah for advice, saying, ‘we are selling them [the Saudis] some arms. Does Your Majesty have any objection to this?’ and Pahlavi answered, ‘not at all. Sell them as much as you like’ complementing that ‘in the meantime, we should think about getting some Saudi like Fahd or Sultan to start an official cooperation with Iran’ (Foreign Relations of the United States July 24/ 1973). Hence, the Shah linked Iran’s militarization with the protection of other regional actors.

The Bahraini independence in 1971 appeared as a window of opportunity for the Shah to promote Iran as a collaborative partner in the regional system. Iran had a historical claim over the island, and most Iranians favored seizing it after the UK’s departure (Alvandi 2010, p. 162). However, most Bahrainis wanted to be emancipated without Iranian influence (al-Saud 2003, pp. 30–32). To insist on its dominance on the island could seriously harm Iran’s regional leadership ambition, as a leader needs neighbors’ legitimacy to thrive. Moreover, King Faisal strongly supported the island’s right to independence, releasing together with the emir of Bahrain a joint communiqué to clarify that ‘any attack on Bahrain would be treated as one on Saudi Arabia’ (al-Saud 2003, p. 47). Hence, perceiving how critical the issue was for Riyadh, the Shah started a long process of negotiating Iranian renounce over Bahrain in a manner that would not affect his domestic legitimacy. That involved direct talks between the Shah and Faisal. In meetings, the king advised Pahlavi on the Gulf Arab rulers’ positions, guiding him to drop his territorial claims and agree to a UN referendum solution (al-Saud 2003, p. 141; Alvandi 2010, p. 168).

Hence, the Shah gave priority to the Saudi-Iranian relations instead of immediate territorial gains, which would be relatively straightforward considering the disproportional difference between Iran’s army and Bahrain’s. The Shah calculated that Arab-Iranian

cooperation could prevent radical ideologies' infiltration and provide Iran's conditions to assume a legitimated leadership role (Alvandi 2010, p. 177). Moreover, it would facilitate his goals to become the Western partner in the Middle East, considering he was aware that Nixon expected working Iran-Saudi relations. After embracing Faisal's assistance on the matter, relations between Iran and the regional monarchies improved (al-Saud 2003, p. 124).

Thus, when the Shah deployed troops to Abu Musa and Tunbs islands, a UAE's territorial claim, in November 1971, the Saudi's reaction was considerably passive, unwilling to intervene (Ansari 1998; Alvandi 2010, p. 176). Faisal said that he did not want to play a role in that dispute as 'it was now on friendly terms with Iran' (al-Saud 2003, p. 123). To Ansari (1998, p. 313), the resolution of the Bahraini issue allowed the Shah to promote his image as a supporter of justice regionally, while his subsequent military seizure of Abu Musa and Tunbs portrayed himself as a nationalist champion, pleasing the domestic crowd.

If Iran was the US's security pillar, Saudi Arabia provided the ideological and cultural legitimacy to the Dual Pillar Diplomacy, offering it a meaning, reducing Arab countries' anxiety, and legitimizing Iranian superintendency. Both Iran and the United States lacked identification with the regional actors and ran the risk of having their behavior rejected without Saudi Arabia's support. Thus, they encouraged Saudi Arabian Islamic leadership, seeing it as a positive element for the order's continuity and stability. In the Shah's memories, for example, it is said that he 'hope[d] that Saudi Arabia will always remain the guardian of these holy places' (Pahlavi 1982, p. 134). Thus, the other two perceived Riyadh's role toward the ummah as an incentive for cooperation.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia became an economic pillar within the strategy, central to preserving global capitalism and a reliable actor that could almost dictate the oil prices within OPEC. While the Twin Pillar partnership did not prevent Tehran or Riyadh from joining the oil embargo in 1973, the king was very cautious about doing it, focusing on appeasing the United States rather than confronting it (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 140; Petersen 2011, p. 144). Faisal took weeks to raise the initial cut in oil exports, which only happened after discussions with the Nixon administration (Long 1985; Al-Rasheed 2010). After the crisis, Riyadh held back or intensified its production to keep the oil prices stable, pleasing the West (Krane 2019). In a speech, Nixon said, 'it is vital for the stability of Saudi Arabia and of the region that economic progress proceed

uninterrupted' (Foreign Relations of the United States 1973). By 1976, when the Shah attempted to push the oil prices up again, Riyadh halted and kept the rates constant (Riedel 2018, p. 53).

In conclusion, while Iran continued to be the security leg of the triangle, Saudi Arabia was growingly becoming the economic one. Riyadh adopted a moderation role among the oil producers, voting against sudden increases in oil prices even if Tehran disagreed, a pattern that consolidated in the next period. Therefore, during the first period, the 'ménage à trois' triangle consisted of the United States assuming a distant partner's role in the order's continuity, whereas Iran promoted itself as the regional leader with Saudi Arabia's collaboration and support. Both Washington and Tehran understood the monarchy's value in maintaining the Persian Gulf. Under the clout of protecting the region from instability, the region experienced one of its most stable decades, with Iraq giving appeasement signals in 1975. However, the bottom-up 1979 Iranian Revolution completely shattered this scenario.

4.6 Conclusion

Tehran, Riyadh, and Washington had positive working relations characterized by one foreign power and two collaborative regional actors for a decade. The independent variable showed how the power distribution after the British departed determined the chosen strategies. First, the United States entered a period of economic deacceleration and had low deployable power in the Persian Gulf. The president had a realist orientation that aimed to find partners in strategy regions to guarantee the Western interests without Washington's direct involvement. In a nutshell, the US's interest in the Persian Gulf revolved around maintaining it outside the Soviet zone of influence. For that, it shared good relations with the two biggest oil-exporting countries, which were also not interested in transforming the region into a Soviet haven. Thus, Washington assessed the environment as not restrictive for a local surrogate actor.

The power variable also illustrated how Iran had the most potential to assume this position of the surrogate actor due to energy, size, population, military, and strategic assets. Due to the concentration of power in his hands, it is difficult for the analysis to delimit each intervening variable's effects, as the Shah was as status-seeking as the country and saw himself as unique as the Iranianess-driven regime identity. What is critical here is that he saw the Nixon Doctrine as an opportunity to boost the country's militarization, modernization, and regional ties – increasing Iran's stable and changeable powers. Thus, power and environmental openness

allowed for a status-seeking behavior that sought to promote Iran's position and prestige without reviewing the systemic structure.

Conversely, power indicated the limitations and vulnerabilities that guided the Saudi Arabian strategy. Issues related to the regime formation, the Wahhabi-centered identity, and the mechanisms of legitimizing the monarchical rule explained how leaders must balance domestic and regional concerns while anxious about any abrupt change. Nevertheless, King Faisal was realistic enough to construct a grand strategy in which Riyadh would take its time to assess if Iran or Iraq were the most significant regional threat and balance accordingly. The 'wait and see approach' relates to how permissive the environment was perceived and the existence of ideological projects that threatened the status quo. Moreover, by evaluating the status and identity variables, it is possible to detect a non-material ambition regarding religious leadership that helped to boost Riyadh's regional appeal and overall changeable power.

In this chapter, the FPE variables revealed how policymakers were aware of the importance of identity and political appeal in the region. Despite his close friendship with the Shah, Nixon knew Iran did not have the needed changeable powers to be accepted as a regional leader and, by including Saudi Arabia in his strategy, he aimed to reduce local anxieties towards Iran. Faisal and the Shah captured this signal and worked together to improve ties and benefit from the Nixon Doctrine. The Shah promoted Iran as the one that could guarantee the other monarchies' stability and security to boost its militarization project. Faisal embarked on this role of the cultural appeaser and moderator of the Arab voice within the Twin Pillar Diplomacy to improve its influence among other Muslim countries and guarantee that the United States would keep Iran's hegemonic ambitions checked.

Therefore, despite their differences in power, status ambitions, and regime identities, each country played roles that coexisted while sharing threat perceptions. While the Saudis were suspicious about Iran's intentions, the Twin Pillar kept Riyadh's anxiety under control. It created what Adib-Moghaddam (2006, p. 14) calls 'psychological ease' for decisions. The three countries had similar concerns about stability and created a collaborative security architecture. Important to stress that they did not compete for status: while the United States ambioned to be a global hegemon, it did not have the intention to compete with Iran in terms of regional power projection, nor Faisal promoted such ambition, aware of his country's power limitations. Riyadh's ambition concerned Islamic leadership, which Tehran and Washington encouraged.

The triangulation ended not for lack of strategic continuity but due to the structural changes in 1979 that altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. In retrospect, it is ironic that Kissinger warned Nixon that ‘if a radical regime were to take over in Saudi Arabia, the US would have little choice but to move closer to Iran’ (Foreign Relations of the United States October 22 / 1970). Kissinger was right that if one of the two countries went rogue, the United States would have the only option to strengthen the other. He *just* mistook which country would turn against them.

5. Second triangle: the *Stable Marriage* (1979 - 1989)

This chapter's systemic change was the 1979 Islamic Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). After presenting these events, I explore the power during the selected period (1979-1989) for the three actors, separating stable power (geography, demography, military, economy, political stability) from changeable power (state alliances, partnerships, regional appeal). Afterward, the Persian Gulf's power balance is discussed, putting the three countries into perspective. The following section investigates the intervening variables: state satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives. Afterward, I argue that the dependent variable, the strategic triangle, had two tendencies during this period: Iranian political isolation and US-Saudi tightening securitarian ties. Finally, the last pages offer conclusions.

5.1 The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Iran-Iraq War

The year 1979 forever altered the relations between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. In the 1970s, the Shah's top-down reforms adversely affected domestic stability. Iranian clerics accused Pahlavi of corruption, the intelligentsia and the urban classes feared his growing authoritarian rule, and the *bazaaris* and the lower classes struggled with rampant inflation and recession (Takeyh 2009, p. 80; Seliktar 2012, p. 6; Saikal 2019, p. 60). By 1977, Pahlavi had alienated almost every sector of the society, lost vital support for the monarchy, and failed to transform Iran into a regional power (Abrahamian 2008, p. 155; Musavian 2014, p. 32). Hence, many protests and strikes against his rule started in many cities.

The revolution was broad-based and bottom-up, built on the backdrop of grassroots mass participation and the people's willingness to sacrifice themselves for fundamental change (Saikal 2019, p. 61). Apart from some palliative economic liberalizations, the Shah mostly responded to the protests with crackdowns, repression, and violence. The army frequently intervened in public gatherings, arresting and fining people. The SAVAK, the secret intelligence police, ruled through terror, increasingly resorting to abuse of power and human rights violations (Ward 2009, p. 212; Seliktar 2012, p. 10). On September 8, 1978, the regime opened fire against protesters, killing a number between 120 to 15 thousand people in what became known as the 'Black Friday.' That catalyzed strike waves that paralyzed the country (Saikal 2019, p. 159).

While affluent people left the country and moved their money abroad, many from the army, *Majlis* politicians, and civil servants joined the revolution (Abrahamian 2008, p. 156;

Seliktar 2012, p. 14). The most affluent revolutionary leader was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then in exile. In February 1979, two weeks after the Shah fled the country, more than three million people waited for Khomeini at Tehran's airport to celebrate the regime's end (Abrahamian 2008, p. 161). It is important to stress that the revolution was a popular movement that englobed a broad spectrum of political, social, and economic groups envisioning social justice. However, in the tumultuous months that followed Pahlavi's fall, the revolution evolved, and its ideological outlines became defined more clearly as anti-imperialist, nationalist, and Islamist (Musavian 2014, p. 32). The regime that finally emerged was radically opposed to the previous, altering, almost completely, Iran's international behavior and agenda.

The regime's consolidation process was abruptly cut short by Iraq's decision to invade Iran on September 22, 1980. Saddam's motivations varied from his ambition to emerge as a regional leader to overconfidence in his army and fear that revolutionary ideas could spread to Iraqi Shiites (Takeyh 2009, p. 84; Ward 2009, p. 241). Saddam initially scored gains in the war, as Iran seemed unprepared for the attacks. However, Iraq's poor planning and the Iranian resistance surprised all (Takeyh 2009, p. 87). By June 1982, Iran had reconquered its territory and decided to attack Iraq. Despite severe disadvantages – shattered economy, dysfunctional army, and lack of allies – Iran faced the war as a holy mission as well as a resilience test (Abrahamian 2008, p. 171). Most importantly, by fighting this holy battle, the clerics managed to mobilize society, repress the opposition, and consolidate their power (Ward 2009, p. 241).

For almost six years, Iran ignored international pressure to end the conflict or the Iraqi attempts to negotiate a settlement. As the conflict dragged on, Iran and Iraq modified their tactics and experimented with new weapons, turning the war into a stalemate that neither party could win or quit (Takeyh 2009, p. 95). Beyond the war of attrition on the ground, they started in 1984 a tanker war in the sea, unsettling the oil shipments' stability in the Persian Gulf. With the war gaining global contours, Iraq received diplomatic and military support from most Arab countries and the United States, gaining a substantial advantage against Iran (Cook and Rawshandil 2009, p. 27). In 1986, for example, after attacking Kuwaiti ships carrying the US flag, Iran had its oil fields bombarded by the US navy.

The war dragged on for more two years. The tanker war evolved into a war of the cities, with intense air raids, missile attacks, and chemical weapons against Iranian civilians (Ward 2009, p. 271; Hiro 2018, p. 103). Having superior firepower and foreign assistance, Iraq was

crushing an enemy that was drained by massive casualties and suffering from weapons shortage (Brands 2016, p. 269). While the war served to consolidate the ayatollah's narrative of resistance, Iran was shattered, the economy was in free fall, and the leader himself revealed signs of defeat. The final drop was when the United States accidentally shot down the Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, killing 290 people. In July 1998, less than a month later, Khomeini accepted a UN ceasefire (Resolution 598), which demanded both countries to retreat from international borders and repatriate war prisoners. The war, which was bloody and costly, had no clear winner.

5.2 Independent variable: power in context

5.2.1 The US's power

5.2.1.1 Stable power

While the 1970s represented a relative decline of the US's supremacy, the 1980s were marked by the attempts to recoil with greatness and guarantee its position as the most powerful country in the international system (Williams 1987). The détente period finished after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, resulting in a new military build-up wave and escalating hostile rhetoric between Washington and Moscow. Considering the stable power components, geography and demography were kept constant compared to the previous chapter. The population grew steadily (from 225 million in 1979 to 246,81 million in 1989) and was well-distributed (World Bank n.d.v), whereas localization assured natural security, friendly bordering countries, and access to resources.

Economically, the decade began with a recession. However, the GDP growth rate returned to be positive already in 1981 (2,5%), reaching its climax in 1984 (7,2%), and closing the period at 3,6% in 1989 (World Bank n.d.j). The inflation rate stayed low, consumption rose, the financial sector bloomed, and investments rocketed (Brands 2016, p. 178). The GDP kept ascending, going from US\$ 2,62 trillion in 1979 to US\$ 5,64 trillion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.g). This economic expansion relates to Reaganomics, a supply-side strategy that reduced taxes, cut federal regulations over the market and curtailed union power (Arestis and Marshall 1990). Hence, the economic growth also represented massive privatization, reduced labor protection, and increased social inequalities. Moreover, Reaganomics produced spiraling budget deficits, making the country more dependent on foreign trade and oil exports (Brands 2016, p. 180).

Public debt also increased due to an expansion of the defense budget. Military expenditure went from US\$ 126,8 billion in 1979 to US\$ 321,8 billion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.p). That represented a rise from 4.9% of the total GDP in 1979 to 6,8% in 1992, closing at 5.8% in 1989 (World Bank n.d.m). Military personal also expanded from 2050 thousand in 1980 to 2240 thousand in 1989 (Singer et al. 1972). Both Carter and Reagan's (1981-1989) administrations set out to modernize deterrent capacities and overhaul the conventional forces to overcome many communication and control problems and protect the forces from obsolescence (Coker 1983, p. 5). They were committed to strengthening rapid intervention capacity in key strategic locations, restoring the US naval power, and expanding tactical forces, particularly by strengthening defense and military research centers (Williams 1987, p. 581).

In the Persian Gulf, the US' focus was on increasing its military presence, acquiring the capability of responding quickly to a local increase in instability. In 1980, the idea of a rapid deployment force (RDF) in the Middle East took shape, consisting of two airborne army divisions, two ranger battalions, six air force wings, three carrier task forces, and three amphibious brigades accompanied by airpower (Isemberg 1984). The naval forces in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean also grew. The Diego Garcia base had a US\$ 400 million reform and expansion, becoming capable of hosting thousands of sailors and supporting the American and British largest naval vessel fleets (Ward 2009, p. 273; Brands 2016, p. 329).

In 1983, the US military reorganized the RDF under the Central Command (CENTCOM), a unified regional command with higher bureaucratic stature and autonomy, controlling more than 290 thousand personnel across four services (Stein 1989, p. 147; Brands 2016, p. 239). The ability to rapidly deploy forces to guarantee stability was first tested from July 1987 to September 1988, during the tanker war phase of the Iran-Iraq war. Operation Earnest Will assumed protection of Kuwait tankers and retaliated against Iran, being the largest US naval convoy operation since the II World War (Stein 1989). The Kuwait ships' reflagging was a fundamental turning point in the US's strategy as it took an operational role in the regional defense (Sick 2018, p. 320). In a matter of weeks, the military projection also expanded via assistance to regional actors, providing arms supply, and investing in developing ports, airfields, air-and-sealift facilities, among others (Ward 2009, p. 284; Brands 2016, p. 239).

In conclusion, the 1980s represented an increase in the US's military capabilities in the region, improving its stable power. In 1984, CENTCOM had the following combat forces

available: an army with four divisions and one brigade, seven tactical fighter wings, two strategic air bomber squadrons, three carrier battle groups, one surface action group, five marine patrol squadrons, and three marine amphibious forces (Iseberg 1984).

5.2.1.2 Changeable power

The Shah's fall weakened the US's changeable power, as its strategy depended on the partnership with Iran. The revolution dismantled the Twin Pillar Diplomacy and forced Washington to develop new ways of managing its regional ties. It sought to improve relations with the remaining conservative actors during the decade, mainly the monarchies (Long 1985; Gause 2010). It also took the needed steps to guarantee that Tehran would not win the war against Iraq. For that, the United States removed Iraq from its list of terrorist nations in 1982 and restored diplomatic ties in 1984. Parallely, it focused on improving securitarian relations with Saudi Arabia, the remaining pillar, signing, in 1982, a defense agreement that established high-level consultation mechanisms and a joint military commission (Niblock 2006, p. 113).

The US's involvement in the tanker war strengthened military cooperation with the Persian Gulf monarchies. Qatar provided storage facilities for weapons, jet fuel, and medicine, while Bahrain offered port and naval facilities, and Kuwait bought much American military equipment (Stein 1989, p. 158). These relations represented a tactic accord that the United States would ensure the regional order. Thus, during the period, Washington consolidated itself as the guarantor of security in the Persian Gulf, finally assuming the earlier role of the United Kingdom (Yetiv 2008; Peterson 2009). By 1989, it had diplomatic representation in almost all regional countries but Iran and South Yemen (Singer et al. 1972).

Diplomatic ties between Iran and the United States broke after a traumatic event, the 444 days of a hostage crisis. On November 4, 1979, Iranian students invaded the US embassy and kept several hostages. The event was the first sample of anti-American Islamism, which has, since then, weakened the US's regional appeal. Iranians promoted Islamism as a force able to challenge and overcome American supremacy. Particularly due to the Iran-Iraq war, many Middle Easterners started to see Washington as yet another imperialist power playing its cards in the region for their benefit (Oren 2007, p. 548). The US's regional appeal was reduced even more after the Iran-Contra affairs, which exposed Washington's duplicity in selling arms to both

Iran and Iraq (Takeyh 2009, p. 56; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 155).²⁰ Hence, while Washington consolidated its capacity to project power in the region and improved security ties with the monarchies, its regional appeal and popularity were forever changed after 1979.

5.2.2 Iranian power

5.2.2.1 Stable power

Considering that power concerns the state's ability to mobilize resources in NCR, a few words about the new regime are necessary. Tumultuous politics marked the first decade after the revolution, with the clerics guaranteeing their supremacy over other political groups and establishing a theocratic hybrid republic (Takeyh 2009, p. 27; Saikal 2019). The new regime is divided into divine rights and peoples' rights, between '*Vox Dei* and *Vox populi*' (Abrahamian 2008, p. 163). The president (chief of the executive) and the *Majles* (legislative and regulatory power) compose the elected branch. The unelected branch comprises the Guardian Council (religious jurists) and the Supreme Leader, or *Velayat e-faqih*, who controls the military, the judiciary, and oversees almost all political decisions (Juneau 2015, p. 96).

Many elements of Iranian power transformed with the revolution and war. For example, geography changed in the first years of the conflict, as Iraq took around 120 kilometers of Iranian territory. However, the state frontiers were restored by the end of the war. Demographically, it is estimated that from ten to forty thousand lives were lost during the revolution, and more than half a million emigrated, mainly from the middle or higher class (Ward 2009, p. 241; Hiro 2018, p. 62). Moreover, tribunals and purges eliminated Shah's loyalists from governmental institutions. By estimative, almost 75% of the Shah's senior officers were executed, and up to 30 thousand were arrested (Seliktar 2012, p. 15). Finally, there were around 200 to 220 thousand battlefield deaths, 16 thousand civilian casualties, 350 to 400 thousand wounded, and more than two million internal refugees (Ward 2009, p. 296). Even So, the population kept growing from 4,35 billion in 1979 to 5,19 billion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.u).

²⁰ From August 1985 to March 1987, the United States agreed to sell arms to Tehran in exchange for their help on releasing American hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon, despite being openly supporting Iraq on the Iran-Iraq war. To make the plot even more complex, the money of the sell was sent to the anti-socialist militia Contras in Nicaragua with the help of the Israelis.

The economy was severely weakened throughout the decade. Months of civil unrest and strikes against the Shah's regime were followed by inflation, recession, and unemployment (Hiro 2018, p. 62). Due to the war and rising political isolation, investments sank, and the GDP growth rate decreased from -10,5% in 1979 to -27,5% in 1980, closing at 6% in 1989 (World Bank n.d.h). Moreover, oil prices declined, and high inflation shoved private investors away, forcing many skilled professionals to emigrate (Pesaran 2000). In addition, due to the hostage crisis, the United States imposed the first of many economic sanctions. Finally, the war in itself was very costly: it consumed around 70% of the Iranian government budget while the public deficit kept accumulating (Esfahani and Squire 2007; Saikal 2019, p. 131).

However, it is important to stress that despite the restrictive scenario, the new regime brought benefits to the working and lower classes via subsidies, labor protection, and commercial concessions (Abrahamian 2008; Saikal 2019). Iranian GDP grew throughout the period, going from US\$ 90,3 billion in 1979 to US\$ 209,1 billion in 1986 and closing at US\$ 120,4 billion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.e). Additionally, the revolution expanded the welfare state, introducing protectionism and price controls (Esfahani and Squire 2007; Abrahamian 2008, p. 176). As a result, there were extraordinary changes in the citizens' daily lives: infant mortality dropped, children's education soared, and illiteracy was nearly eradicated (Abrahamian 2008, p. 180). With the war's end, Iran's oil exports started to rise, but economic recovery was not achieved mainly due to sanctions (Pesaran 2000; Esfahani and Squire 2007).

Iranian military capacity was also severely deflated in the 1980s. The purges resulted in around 12 thousand military officers being arrested, dismissed, or forcefully retired, around 70 generals were reportedly tortured and executed, and hundreds of lower-ranking officers deserted (Seliktar 2012, p. 29). Thus, the military had a considerable loss of skilled human resources (Takeyh 2009, p. 85). Ward (2009, p. 225) says that, by the mid-1980s, between ten to twelve thousand military personnel had been removed from services, and all forces suffered losses. For example, the air forces dropped from 1000 to 65 thousand personnel, while the navy went from 28 to 23 thousand personnel (Ward 2009). Nevertheless, compared to other regional countries, Iran kept a recruiting advantage due to its population size and military culture. While the military personnel dropped from 305 thousand in 1980 to 240 thousand in 1982, this number rose again, reaching 654 thousand in 1988 (Singer et al. 1972).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Shah Pahlavi focused on the military build-up and had the highest defense budget in the Middle East. The revolutionary regime attempted to reduce military spending, but that was limited due to the war. The military expenditure represented 5.7% of the GDP in 1979 and 4,5% in 1989. The military spending went from US\$ 4,9 billion in 1979 to US\$ 16,3 billion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.n). Nevertheless, many contracts with American and European supply companies were canceled, and already purchased weaponry was not delivered, further harming the army's readiness (Ward 2009, p. 245). Here it is important to stress that military modernization depended on the US's assistance in training, equipment, and ammunition until the revolution. Much equipment became non-operational with the end of US-Iran relations. More precisely, around 30% of the army and 50 to 60% of the air force equipment were inoperative, as well as 60% of the helicopters (Ward 2009, p. 246).

Finally, the regime created the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a special force to protect the revolution, monitor people's allegiance, and oversee other institutions (Hiro 2018, p. 65). This guard began competing with the army for resources and became a central pillar of the regime (Keynoush 2016, p. 117). The IRGC was composed mainly of lower-middle urban classes dedicated to Khomeini's cause, many willing to become martyrs for the revolution's sake (Abrahamian 2008; Hiro 2018, p. 65; Saikal 2019). Quickly, the IRGC consolidated itself as a crucial (and frequently unaccountable) element of Iranian power. It controlled around 200 thousand war volunteers, developed a ministry and acquired naval and air units (Abrahamian 2008, p. 176). Besides, IRGC fused defense with economics after the war, becoming critical to the 1990s development, a topic for the next chapter.

5.2.2.2 Changeable power

The revolution transformed Iran's partnerships and alliances. Together with the hostage crisis and the war, Iran's radical rhetoric drove Iran away from its traditional conservative partners and closer to actors that did not conform to a Western-oriented order (Ehteshami 2008; Kinch 2016, p. 60). The new regime had ideological characteristics that incited fear among the other regional leaders, as the intervening variables discuss. Khomeini's Iran wanted to export its revolution, which pushed the Persian Gulf monarchies away. As a result, except for Syria and Libya, all Middle Eastern countries supported Iraq against Iran. Many of them also broke diplomatic ties with Tehran. While in 1980, Iran had 58 diplomatic representations worldwide,

this number was reduced to 39 already by 1985 (Singer et al. 1972). In the region, only South Yemen and Kuwait kept diplomatic ties with Iran.

Nevertheless, by promoting a revisionist political stand, Khomeini's Islamism appealed to some marginalized minorities and groups who wanted the region to change (Saikal 2019, p. 7). Hence, Iran promoted a new type of interaction within the regional order by cultivating relations with non-state groups, many of them considered terrorists by Western standards. For example, Iran sent one thousand IRGC personnel to Lebanon in 1982 to support, train, and organize Hezbollah (Ward 2009, p. 268). Since then, Hezbollah has become one of Iran's most reliable partners, which trains other revolutionary groups in the region (Chubin 2009; Kinch 2016).

Moreover, Iran increased its relations with Third World countries and became a Non-Aligned Movement active member (Keynoush 2016, p. 131). It defected from CENTO, the politico-military pact with Western economies, and sought to resume the Regional Development Co-operation Organization (renamed Economic Cooperation Organization in 1985), focusing on expanding trade ties with countries such as Turkey and Pakistan (Ehteshami 2008, p. 130). Besides, despite its rejection of communism, it sought good working relations with URSS and China, mainly because they became key trade and arms supply partners (Saikal 2019, p. 91).

5.2.3 Saudi Arabia's power

5.2.3.1 Stable power

The period represented a deceleration in terms of stable power as the oil prices gradually reduced in the 1980s. However, geography kept constant despite the regional conflict. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia was beneficiated by a geostrategic position and access to energy resources and, on the other hand, lacking other essential resources. Demographically, the period exhibited the first growth reduction from 5,5% in 1979 to 3,8% in 1989 (World Bank n.d.r). However, the fertility rate was still one of the fastest worldly: 7,2 births per woman in 1979 and 6 in 1989 (World Bank n.d.r). Thus, the population went from 9,13 million in 1979 to 15,6 million in 1989 (World Bank n.d.u). Furthermore, considering the disproportional amount of youth within the social base, there was an upsurge in the migrant labor force to fulfill domestic demand during this period. It is estimated that around 30% of the population was migrant in the 1980s, being 60% of the labor force non-national (Niblock 2006, p. 56).

The oil barrel price dropped from US\$ 39 in June 1980 to US\$ 12.7 in June 1986, closing in 1989 at US\$ 13. That undermined the kingdom's ability to sustain high levels of welfare politics and modernization, stagnating growth (Jones 2010, p. 6). As a result, the GDP fell from US\$ 111,8 billion in 1979 to US\$ 95,3 billion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.f). The GDP growth rate was negative for most of the decade, reaching its lowest in 1982 (-20,7%) and closing at -0,5% in 1989 (World Bank n.d.i). Thus, the decade represented a period of accumulating deficit budgets and borrowing from international banks. The monarchy sold foreign assets and cut expenditures, producing an irregular socio-economic development pattern (Niblock 2006, p. 55).

The deceleration echoed in the military budget. In 1979, Saudi Arabia's military budget was US\$ 17,6 billion, while it was US\$ 12,7 billion in 1989 (World Bank n.d.o). However, this number only reflected the reduction of income, not an active decision to reorient the government budget from defense to other sectors. In 1979, the military expenditure took 15% of the GDP, 19% in 1984, and 13.3% in 1980 (World Bank n.d.l). Independently from the oil prices decline, the state's focus on defense capacitation was linked to the fact that its two most prominent neighbors were locked in war (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 242). Consequently, Saudi Arabia's spending is centered on defense infrastructure while highly dependent on the United States for assistance, training, and supply (Safran 1998, p. 323).

In the second half of the decade, Saudi Arabia started to buy first-line and high-technology weaponry systems (Cordesman 1997, p. 107). Air force and defensive capacities were gradually modernized: in 1981, the United States sold F15 combat and five AWACS aircraft, making Saudi Arabia the first country in the region to possess both technologies (Safran 1998, p. 327). As a result, the air force grew, having about 165 combat aircraft by 1986, superior to Iran (Levrant 2019, p. 173). The naval force also strengthened, with purchases aiming to improve its capabilities qualitatively (Levrant 2019, p. 174). The goal was to reach a level of deterrence capacitation that increased other actors' costs for invasion while ensuring the US's protection in the medium term. It did not have, however, offensive capacities in case it faced a war. Saudi Arabia continued to have reduced military personnel, enlarging only from 80 thousand in 1980 and 82 thousand in 1989 (Singer et al. 1972).

In short, the investments did not fully transform the Saudi Arabian forces, which continued to be affected by tribal and class distortions that blocked professionalization

(Wynbrandt 2004, p. 4). A fundamental problem within the military was the disproportion between the small-sized armed forces and the demands created by the country's vast dimensions (Levran 2019, p. 170). The kingdom often relied on foreign armies for patrolling and protection, mainly from Pakistan (Safran 1998; Cordesman 1997, p. 108). To tackle this issue, they started to build military cities near the border with Iraq and Kuwait, housing around 65 thousand personnel and civilians and receiving foreign training assistance (Cordesman 2002). Another problem is the military's division into two different commands (conventional armed forces and the National Guard), which affected the general organization and delayed modernization projects (Cordesman 1997, p. 109; Levran 2019). These problems led to a lack of operational proficiency in responding to possible ground attacks. Therefore, Saudi Arabia remained vulnerable to regional attacks and depended on foreign assistance.

5.2.3.2 Changeable power

The regime change in Iran altered Riyadh's changeable power. First, while Iran was not a closer friend, Pahlavi's regime was a conservative monarchy that contributed to the regional order via the Twin Pillar Diplomacy. The growing radicalization of the revolution and Khomeini's anti-monarchical discourse distressed the Iran-Saudi ties until the diplomatic relations ended in 1988. Second, as the only remaining pillar in the US's strategy, Saudi Arabia increased its strategic value to the West. From 1979 on, the country was the most significant Persian Gulf country aligned with the Western discourse and against Soviet communism. In a nutshell, its changeable power increased at the cost of sharper anxiety towards the order.

Saudi Arabian changeable power was also boosted due to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) in 1981. Facing mounting regional instability, the Arab Persian Gulf states (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates) developed an organization to coordinate policy on issues ranging from security to economy and education (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 152). The GCC's objectives included promoting regional security, keeping it free from international conflicts, and respecting national sovereignty (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 245). It enhanced domestic security cooperation and provided a device to collectively request outside assistance or provide aid to others (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 11). Due to its larger territory and economy, Saudi Arabia imposed its security perspective on the smaller sheikhdoms and assumed the position of organization's manager (Fürtig 2002, p. 77; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 153).

Hence, Saudi Arabia became the ‘bigger brother’ of the other GCC members, especially under the Western eyes. Considering that the smaller monarchies were younger, Riyadh promoted itself as a model to be emulated and a leading representative of conservative regimes in the Middle East (Niblock 2006; Eilts 2011). To respond to the Iranian Revolution, it intensified its donations in the name of Islamic solidarity (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 154). Finally, it was also deeply involved in Afghanistan’s invasion, taking the lead among other Muslims in condemning the Soviet interference and boycotting Kabul while assisting the United States in the conflict (Safran 1998, p. 359). Therefore, Saudi Arabia increased its activism in the region by intensifying its ties with other conservative Islamic nations and organizations while strengthening relations with the United States.

5.3 Persian Gulf’s balance of power

The revolution and the war altered the power balance and partnership dynamics in the region. First, the Iranian state transformed, becoming the reverse of what it once was in almost every aspect. Quite quickly, countries that once profited from Iranian regional protection were supporting Saddam’s war. The Twin Pillar order was gone, and Iran was no longer willing to guarantee the Western interests. That drove the United States to increase its power projection as its other regional partner, Saudi Arabia, did not have the needed capabilities to do so. Second, the Iran-Iraq war was highly internationalized and devastating to both fighting sides. Nevertheless, Iraq strengthened its regional power while receiving great international support, whereas Iran became only a shadow of the military power it once was (Ward 2009, p. 226). Thus, although the regional power balance continued multipolar, the US’s power regionally increased, and the pendulum now tended towards Iraq, which was most of the war ahead of Iran.

The war was Saddam’s bid for regional leadership, and while he failed to end Khomeini’s regime, he blocked a possible diffusion of the revolutionary ideals and proved Iraq as the most powerful country (Brands 2016, p. 270; Hiro 2018, p. 109). That coincided with the Soviet operation in Afghanistan, a new arms race, and the hostile rhetoric resumption between the two superpowers. Therefore, the 1980s were more restrictive and conditioned by bipolarity than the 1970s. In 1986, Moscow sent the first Red Navy warship to the Persian Gulf, whereas Washington heightened its naval presence significantly during the tanker phase (Ward 2009, p. 280). The United States and its allies deployed around fifty ships with highly sophisticated technology (Keynoush 2016, p. 153). By the end of the war, the United States had superior

power projection than in the 1970s, with a military presence and more substantial defensive commitments with local states.

Table two: comparable stable power in the region (1980-1990)

Country	GDP (current USD)			GDP growth rate			Military spending (current USD)			Military personnel		
	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990
United States	2,85 Tn	4,33 Tn	5,96 Tn	2,5%	4,2%	1,9%	143,9 Bn	245,1 Bn	289,7 Bn	2 M	2,2 M	2,1 M
Iran	94,3 Bn	180,2 Bn	124,8 Bn	- 27,5%	2,1%	13,8%	4,8 Bn	10,7 Bn	17,5 Bn	305 k	345 k	440 k
Saudi Arabia	164,5 Bn	103,9 Bn	117,6 Bn	5,6%	- 9,7%	15,1%	20,7 Bn	17,6 Bn	16,3 Bn	79 k	80 k	146 k
Iraq	53,4 Bn	48,2 Bn	179,8 Bn	24,8%	1,4%	57,8%	2,97 Bn	12,8 Bn *	8,61 Bn *	430 k	788 k	1,3 M

Author's elaboration ²¹

Conversely, Iran had much of its power reduced due to the revolution and the long-standing war. First, the Pahlavi's regime militarization was highly dependable on the United States and became inoperative after the revolution. Second, high-ranking officers fled, were arrested, or prosecuted, wrecking the military organization. Third, the war hampered the new regime's consolidation, forcing the government to orient most of its policy and budget to the conflict. Fourth, low oil prices, financial bottlenecks, and growing international and regional isolation inflicted on Iran's capability to project power. To Ward (2009, p. 226), the decade threw the most prominent country in the region into economic, military, and infrastructural chaos.

Finally, the decade meant to Saudi Arabia a deceleration of its economic development in tandem with a boost in its strategic relevance. Riyadh became the only pillar for the West, enhancing its securitarian ties with the United States. Moreover, although it lacked Iran's or Iraq's military capability, Saudi Arabia had crucial anti-communist credentials, a strategic location, and cultural and religious clouts in the Arab world. After 1979, it assumed a more

²¹ GDP, GDP growth rate and military spending are taken from World Bank, with the exception of Iraq in 1985 and 1990 – these are taken from the CoW database Singer et al. 1972. Also from CoW are the numbers for military personal.

prominent role in the Islamic front against communism and enhanced its assistance to countries and Muslim organizations. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was perceived as the one that brought together the interests of the remaining Persian Gulf monarchies into the GCC. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia's changeable power improved throughout the period. However, economic stagnation and defense vulnerability obstructed stable power growth. Thus, Riyadh continued to be exposed to regional threats despite constant military spending (Niblock 2006; Rich 2012, p. 473).

Therefore, the decade marked the beginning of the Persian Gulf's militarization: after the 1980s, a highly internationalized local conflict has shaped the balance of power in each following decade. The war lasted eight years, and most of the time, Iraq was ahead of Iran, receiving support from the Western and Arab countries. That meant that the regional power pendulum, which in the 1970s swung in the Iranian direction, turned to Iraq in the 1980s. Under the Soviet's political clout, Iraq became one of the most powerful countries in the Middle East, ruled by a bold leader that sought regional leadership (Chubin and Tripp 1996; Fürtig 2002).

Only the balance of power approach does not explain why Saudi Arabia and the United States chose to support Iraq against Iran. First, for the United States to not have ties with Iran meant an opportunity for the Soviets to gain influence. Thus, securing a certain level of relations with Tehran would benefit Washington in the bipolar competition context. Second, Saddam was not only stronger but also continued with secular and mostly pro-Soviet rhetoric. Hence, Saudi Arabia's decision to support Saddam against Iran is not self-evident by Neorealist approaches. They also cannot explain why Iran decided not to align with the Soviets while antagonizing the United States. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the ideational, cognitive, and leadership factors that intervened in the strategic reassessment within each state to comprehend why the revolution and the war transformed the triangle from a 'ménage à trois' (three positive bilateral relationships) to a 'stable marriage' (one positive bilateral relationship, two negative).

5.4 The intervening variables

5.4.1 First intervening variable: status satisfaction

- It showcases the country's ambitions toward the system.
- The ideational variable discusses if a country's perception of its ascribed status matches its aspired status.

- It shifts the parameters towards revisionism or continuity.

5.4.1.1 US's status satisfaction

In the Cold War context, the US's ambitions were to be the hegemon within the Western hemisphere and check the emergence of other hegemonies in geostrategic regions (Layne 2006; Brands 2016). The United States was a status quo actor, satisfied with its ascribed position because the Western block (the status community) approved and incentivized its leadership. Nevertheless, during the first half of the 1980s, the US's anxiety in the Middle East amplified, pushing for more proactivity to secure interests. First, the Red Army's presence in Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq war jeopardized Western access to oil. The 1973 oil crisis taught us that an unstable oil market was a nightmare scenario for the global capitalist economy. Second, the Iranian Revolution removed Washington's leading regional partner, dismantling Nixon's security arrangement. Thus, these events forced the United States to react and search for new means of protecting its interests in the region (Yetiv 2008, p. 39).

In a nutshell, the perception that their interests in the region could be threatened increased. The general understanding was that a possible Iran-Soviet connection could collapse the regional power balance (Brands 2016, p. 226). The following lines exemplify this assessment:

'This is not an estimate that the Soviets will seize the Iranian oil fields. It is rather that the combination of the Soviet need for oil, the power vacuum in Iran, the "strategic window" of the early 80's, the perceived weakness of US leadership, and the geographic advantages of the USSR make such an action a thinkable course either for an erratic older Soviet leadership or an aggressive younger one. The Politburo might come to see Iran as the *schwerpunkt* of the long Soviet struggle with the US. A successful Soviet operation in Iran, even if it did not lead to a cut-off of other Gulf oil, would affect the power balance almost as decisively.' (Office of the Chief of Staff Files n.d., p. 23)

The United States became convinced that the Persian Gulf security was endangered. Hence, it was necessary to increase their own involvement in the region as no other actor could replace Tehran (Yetiv 2008, p. 39; Brands 2016, p. 226). A US memorandum concluded that:

'Given great volatility and vulnerability of PG/IO [Persian Gulf Indian Ocean] region, our most serious short-term and mid-term security problem is assuring Free World access to Persian Gulf oil. While this oil is more needed by Europe and Japan than the US, the resulting economic chaos if it were cut off would undermine US security as well. Moreover, the Gulf is the key area in which our current capabilities are most lacking. Therefore, our top defense priority has been to create a greater ability to deter or defend against Soviet domination of PG oil.' (Office of the Chief of Staff Files n.d.)

Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski informed Carter that they needed to deal ‘with the dangers to the Strait of Hormuz quickly’ and develop a ‘security framework for Southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf’ (Office of Staff Secretary n.d.). For that, they conceived the Carter Doctrine, which defined the Persian Gulf’s security as a new priority. It idealized for the United States a position as order protector so that there were ‘no more Irans, no more Afghanistans’ (Brands 2016, p. 121). In other words, the Carter Doctrine broadened the US’s ambitions in the Persian Gulf: it aimed to check any actors challenging the Western-oriented order. Not only Washington wanted the region under Western influence, but it also took the lead in ensuring that.

Therefore, the status aspirations included the role of order protector. The Persian Gulf monarchies quickly welcomed this new position and increased their weaponry procurement and security ties, indicating an eagerness to see the superpower more involved (Gause 1994; Al-Rasheed 2010). Hence, most local actors approved this ambitions amplification, ensuring that the US’s status aspiration and ascription matched. The perception that there was no status dissonance can be seen in this staff memorandum addressed to Carter:

‘The Middle Eastern states, and particularly those of the Gulf, are of course less concerned with the economic well-being of the West than of their own, but their interest in avoiding infection from Iran is as great as ours in protecting them from it. Some are concerned over the general US-USSR power balance (Saudi Arabia) but most (Iraq) would be more concerned over the clear and present danger of a Soviet-oriented.’ (Office of the Chief of Staff Files n.d.)

The status satisfaction variable illustrates how a growing sense of threat to its interests in the Persian Gulf pushed the United States to step up its involvement in assisting partners. The ambitions were clearly stated: guarantee order and the oil market, deny the Soviet Union's expansion and defend traditional partners. Washington understood that most local actors expected this positioning (Takeyh 2009; Blight et al. 2012; Kinch 2016), matching the status aspiration to the status ascription. Nevertheless, Iran started to reject the US’s role in the region, presenting its revolutionary Islamism as an alternative to contest the Western-oriented order. Hence, the new revisionist Islamic republic became an obstacle to the US’s status satisfaction.

Nevertheless, anxiety towards the order reduced when it became clear that the Iranian Revolution did not open space for more Soviet influence in the region. Moreover, by supporting Iraq in the war and increasing securitarian ties with the monarchies, Washington assured that the Iranian revisionist ideology could not spread beyond the country’s borders. By the second

half of the selected period, Iran was primarily isolated, and the newly formed GCC aligned its interests with the West, reducing the US' anxiety towards the order.

5.4.1.2 Iranian status satisfaction

The regime change in Iran altered the country's ambitions, transforming it into a prime example of a revisionist state, with a disparity between the status it aspires and the one it perceives to be ascribed by its status community. The 1979 revolutionaries felt the international system was unjust to most countries, benefiting only those at the top of the power distribution (Firooz-Abadi 2012, p. 43). The global order's norms and standards had no real value to the new regime because they were designed to sustain the Western hegemony (Takeyh 2009, p. 19). The regime identity section further explores the whys and wherefores of this view. Here, it is crucial to understand that the revolutionary leadership argued that the international system was discriminatory, undermining non-conformist countries' autonomy (Juneau 2015, p. 87).

The revolution was revisionist as it did not ally with any superpower nor conform to the bipolar structure (Abrahamian 2008; Seliktar 2012). Iran called for the liberation of all Muslims who felt oppressed by imperialist powers via the slogan 'neither East nor West, but Islamic' (Saikal 2019, p. 78). The new identity that the revolutionaries created for themselves had complex identitarian elements. Iranian intellectuality linked Islam with a global social duty, shaping the country's ambitions via an intricate fusion of justice struggle, Third Worldism, and Islamism (Firooz-Abadi 2012, p. 51). For them, Islam was 'an ideology focused on class cleavages and division of the international system between capitalistic powers and the larger developing bloc' (Takeyh 2009, p. 16). Thus, God encouraged a battle against Western oppression and Eastern secular materialism. According to Mohammadi (2012, p. 78), Khomeini would say that 'the US is worse than Britain; Britain is worse than the US; the Soviet Union is worse than both.'

Nonetheless, the rejectionist narrative centered on the United States, blaming the superpower for much of the Shah's discriminatory policies. Pahlavi's alliance with Washington served to keep Iranians underdeveloped and submissive. For Khomeini, 'so long as the United States and other superpowers continue with their oppression and crimes, our nation too will continue its confrontation and struggle against them, while safeguarding its comprehensive independence with all its might' (National Security Advisor 1980). Thus, Iran's ambition was to confront the *Pax Americana* using tales of global solidarity and anti-imperialism (Saikal

2019, p. 78). This way, the revolution overlapped with other Third-World movements based on anti-colonialism and non-alignment. It criticized the political-economic system, asserting that the Western model did not support peripheral countries' development (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 9; Firooz-Abadi 2012, p. 52). In an Iranian diplomat's words:

‘Today, the balance of power rather than the rule of law has been accepted as the basis and only possible method of safeguarding security, not only nationally, but regionally and globally as well. The recourse to the threat or use of force, aggression, the occupation of the lands of others by force and the infringement of sovereignty are all being utilised without being met by any serious opposition on the Part of the United Nations and other international forums. We must acknowledge that in many instances the United Nations has even gone so far as to contribute to the legitimisation of such methods. IS it not true that, in practice, the maintenance of the status quo and even submission to changed situations created by acts of aggression have become the general rule in international relations?’ (United Nations 1986)

After the revolution, Iran wanted to lead dissent in the Persian Gulf against the Western-inclined order (Fürtig 2002, p. 144). If Iran represented God's wishes, and, as *his* visions were not confined to a single country, Tehran needed to assume the position of an Islamic revolution's broadcaster (Katouzian 2010). For Khomeini, there was no choice but united Muslims everywhere to topple corrupt regimes (Keddie and Cole 1986, p. 8). Therefore, Iran continued to aspire for regional leadership, but now with a religious and revisionist overtone. It sought this position among those who wanted to emancipate from the existing order. Thus, Iran's status aspiration relied on its ability to influence Islamist activism (Mabon 2016, 97, 101). It idealized a new pan-Islamic regional unity in which they should have a primacy position.

However, Iran perceived that its neighbors did not acknowledge such aspired new status. The new regime had no external patrons or allies, and both superpowers were uneasy with its revolutionary pretensions (Takeyh 2009, p. 36). Moreover, Iranians saw the Iran-Iraq war as an attempt by Saddam, the West, and other regional actors to ‘snuff out the revolution’ (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 10). It was astonishing to them that the international community was siding with the invading country, keeping silent when Saddam used chemical weapons against civilians (Cook and Rawshandil 2009, p. 26). At the UN, Minister Velayati criticized international inaction, saying that ‘if Iran is subjected to foreign intervention, to naked aggression or to an economic blockade, nothing seems to take place’ (United Nations 1986). He continued:

‘Tension in the Persian Gulf has been constantly escalating because of, on the one hand, the Iraqi aggression against the Islamic Republic of Iran and, on the other, the intensification of the United States military presence in the countries of the region; the presence of the United States fleet in the Sea of Oman as part

of the destructive and aggressive structure of the “Rapid Deployment Force” - which, under a new development, is to be called the “Central Command”; and the creation of new military bases in Persian Gulf littoral States.’ (United Nations 1986)

To Chubin and Tripp (1996, p. 13), Iranians ‘were frustrated at being depicted as a regional menace while the Arab states armed and funded Iraq, invited outside powers into the Gulf [and] stocked up on arms that would be called destabilizing.’ Fürtig (2002, p. 74) adds that Tehran perceived the GCC's foundation as primarily an anti-Iranian military pact, a ‘plot to keep Iran out of the Gulf affairs.’ Iran was convinced that Western powers systematically worked to prevent it from playing an independent regional role (Kinch 2016). Therefore, this variable shows how Iran’s interpretation of its position in the system pushed a strategy that challenged the international norms and traditions. In conclusion, its ambitions for a revised order pushed for a rejectionist international behavior that condemned the foreign presence in the region and supported other revisionist and revolutionary actors.

5.4.1.3 Saudi Arabian status satisfaction

Saudi Arabia was a status quo actor that viewed the system as a constant source of threats and depended on the regional order’s continuity (Safran 1998; Bronson 2006; Niblock 2006). This variable shows that the selected period substantially boosted Saudi Arabia’s anxiety about the order. The Iranian Revolution, the Afghanistan war, and the Iran-Iraq war: the Persian Gulf monarchies were ‘caught in the mounting instability’ (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 151). While Riyadh’s ambitions continued the same – to receive protection from an extra-regional power that did not intervene in domestic matters – its threat perception soared.

Recapitulating the points made in the first triangle, Saudi Arabia’s political ethos is linked to an intrinsic sense of vulnerability and suspicion towards the neighborhood and foreign ideologies. For that matter, it had traditionally given preference for a regional security arrangement coordinated by an extra-regional actor that can control locals’ hegemonic ambitions. Therefore, the fall of a friendly monarchy by a revolution that established a new revisionist actor was perceived as a significant threat. First, the Pahlavi regime’s fall obliterated the conservative bloc in the Persian Gulf, reversing Saudi Arabia’s previous geopolitics gains with the Twin Pillar strategy. Second, the Shah's fall meant that the United States ultimately failed to shield its most important partner, raising Saudi Arabia’s insecurity about their

protection (Safran 1998, p. 231). Parallely, the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan set off Riyadh's alarms, as it perceived socialism as the prime enemy of Islam.

However, throughout the period, Iran got isolated, the Soviets lost the war, and the United States stepped up its capacity to project power into the Persian Gulf. Hence, Saudi Arabia's anxiety about the order was reduced. Thus, as the United States improved its power projection, Saudi Arabia again felt more comfortable with the status quo. Moreover, the period consolidated the idea that close security cooperation between Washington and Riyadh was necessary for both sides (Niblock 2006, p. 68). In Reagan's words: 'Saudi Arabia has assumed an even more important and active role in the world and regional affairs [and] our mutual interests have developed to include many issues of great importance to the world' (Ronald Regan Presidential Library n.d.b).

The Iran-Iraq war was understood in Saudi Arabia as a struggle between two expansionist actors, both menacing and with superior capabilities (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 151; Hiro 2018, p. 99). They feared that whomever the winner was, it would eventually try to dominate the other regional countries. As the only left pillar of the previous strategy, Saudi Arabia felt the need to step up its capacity to protect itself and the other smaller monarchies from such threats. The GCC foundation can be understood in this context. GCC was Saudi Arabia's response to its geostrategic importance enlargement after 1979, projecting itself as a coordinator of the local actors' security interests (Eilts 2011, pp. 224–225). The United States approved this 'big brother' responsibility and recognized 'the leading role of Saudi Arabia' (White House 1984).

To conclude, the status satisfaction variable indicates that Saudi Arabia continued to be satisfied with its status, even if it began the period with higher anxiety towards the regional order. Their ambitions continued the same, but they added a new layer of anti-instability behavior in the GCC, which the United States and other regional actors approved. Therefore, this variable shows how Saudi Arabia continued to be a status quo actor. Therefore, strategies should aim towards coordinating policies with partners to guarantee the regional order, now threatened not only by the growing presence of the Soviet Union but also by Iranian revisionist behavior.

5.4.2 Second intervening variable: regime identity

- It is the cognitive variable referring to a regime's self-perceived images.

- It provides self-schemas for coping with behavior complexity.
- It narrows the band of possibilities of action.

5.4.2.1 US's regime identity

The US's regime identity is the only intervening variable that does not change throughout the thesis. The identity is based on a sense of uniqueness, as their experience would differ qualitatively from others. Americans believed to have the mission of promoting the liberal exceptional model, founded on principles of freedom, individuality, and property (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Oren 2007). Believing in human nature's universal constancy, the US's founders agreed that the civil and political norms that defined their country should be globally fostered (Monten 2005). Hence, this cognitive filter orients the policymakers to promote its values as an example to be emulated or imposed. This variable shows which ideological lens policymakers can use to understand the US's international role.

The protection of its core liberal principles is intertwined with the distribution of power and the expansion of the economic capitalist model everywhere (Williams 1972). The 'open democracy' philosophy meant that to protect itself, the United States should systematically expand its political-economic model. Thus, the variable indicates a preference for policies that maintained stability, prevented hostile actors' empowerment, protected the free market, expanded liberal capitalism, and supported friendly governments. The identity has an ideational connotation, influencing how Washington assesses all that is challenging, denying, or rejecting liberal values as a threat or an enemy. If the United States sees itself as the unavoidable good, those challenging its dominance are enemies of the global order and the 'custodians of all that is corrupted' (Kinch 2016). In other words, moral superiority, divine mission, and liberal responsibility coined a manicheist interpretation of international politics.

During the selected period, subscription to this identity drove the policymakers towards strategies that protected and promoted liberal values to check the expansion of Soviet influence or other 'corrupted ideologies' that challenged their 'benign domination' (Layne 2006; Dueck 2006). Leaders could adopt internationalist, nationalist, progressive, or realist lenses to interpret this cognitive filter (Dueck 2006). While Carter was close to the internationalist and progressist paradigm, Reagan was a hardline nationalist, as the FPE section explores. Despite their choice, all these lenses pushed Washington to block any hostile ideology on Western areas of influence, protect the free market, and instigate economic openness (Layne 2006, p. 32). Hence, it oriented

both administrations during the selected period that Iranian revisionism and rejection of the US-inclined regional order was a menace to their liberal identity, discouraging strategies that conveyed coexistence with such an ideology.

5.4.2.2 Iranian regime identity

The new Iranian regime is based on a self-image that it should be a regional political leader due to its pan-Islamic and anti-imperialist stand. Therefore, this identity had a solid ideological connotation. Throughout the analysis, this variable explains why Iran filters out policy options that imply systemic accommodation. The following line of Ayatollah Khomeini on the eve of the revolution illustrates Iran's ideational motivations:

'today, our country is enslaved in every respect of its life: political, economic, cultural and military. We must, therefore, expel the exploiters and colonisers whomsoever they may be. We will have to devote all the rich resources of our country to bettering the lives of our people, who are today oppressed workers, living in sickness and poverty.' (Nobari *apud* Saikal 2019, p. 65)

The revolutionaries fought to break the cycle of oppression and exploitation by reversing Pahlavi's political ethos. While the revolution was possible due to a broad and diverse ideological spectrum, the clerics' popularity and organization meant that religion soon dominated the new regime. As the FPE variable shows, Ayatollah Khomeini was a trailblazer in engineering Islamic political thinking inspired by many famous anti-Shah intellectuals (Kashani-Sabet 2002; Kinch 2016, p. 46). For example, Khomeini based the country's revisionism on Jalal al-e Ahmad's concept of *gharbzadegi* or 'West-toxification' (Katouzian 2010, p. 37; Abrahamian 2008, p. 186). *Gharbzadegi* warned that non-Western societies were becoming susceptible to Western culture and costumes as a 'disease' corrupting endogenous values. In Khomeini's interpretation, this toxification was global and could only be overcome by turning Iran into the vanguard against imperialist oppression (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, p. 158).

The regime also borrowed from Ali Shariati's *bazgasht be khishtan* or 'return to the self.' This concept combined modern political thought, anti-colonial struggle, socialism, and Islamic militant philosophy, navigating Franz Fanon's and Marx's intellectual waters (Abrahamian 1982). For Shariati, the Iranians needed to rediscover their national roots via Shiism, which the Shah suppressed in favor of the Aryan and pre-Islamic myths (Abrahamian 1982; Adib-Moghaddam 2012, p. 158). To Khomeini, *bazgasht be khistan* meant that Islam (Shiism,

mainly) was the tool to break from the Western dependency cycle and return Iran's focus to the region. By emphasizing religion as a tool to emancipate oppressed Muslims, Iran repositioned itself in the center of a movement for global justice and equality (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, p. 159).

Thus, Islamism is perceived as an alternative to systemic subjugation, a tool to fight oppressive governments, and a path to re-insert Iran into the regional system. Here it is crucial to stress that Iran portrayed itself as pan-Islamic, in the sense that it talked to all Muslims. Political Islam should overcome any separation between state, society, and faith, making no ethnic, sectarian, or linguistic distinctions (Takeyh 2009, p. 21; Darwich 2014, p. 14). Thus, they rejected that their influence should be limited because they were Shia. In Khomeini's words,

‘there is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance, the Arabs or Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united’ (Meneshari 1988)

Still, Iran's identity strongly emphasized Shia thinking and its ultimate expression of faith: martyrdom (Kinch 2016, p. 70). Oppression, violence, and harassment marked the Shias' political history. Traditionally, this sect is a social minority that has been underprivileged and persecuted in many Arab countries (Fürting 2002, p. 35). Khomeini focused on the tragic fate of Imam Hussayn, the ‘ultimate homo Islamicus,’ as an example of the Shia people's resilience (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, p. 158). To Juneau (2015, p. 89) and Takeyh (2009, p. 88), being the first Shia-ruled government allowed Iran to project itself as a warrior against injustice towards minorities. In this sense, Khomeini managed to refurbish the sect ‘from a conservative quietist faith into a militant political ideology’ (Abrahamian 1993, p. 3).

Iran produced a pan-Islamism identity embedded in the Shias' discourse of resistance struggle. That permitted the country to see itself as a leader among those fighting imperialism and articulating the opposition to the superpowers (Fürting 2002, p. 43; Adib-Moghaddam 2012, p. 159). Thus, Iran saw itself as a regional leader, a role it deserved now due to its ideational values. The ‘Islamic city upon the hill,’ Iran presented itself as the center of an up-and-coming Muslim awakening. Thus, the Shah's Persian nationalism was substituted by a sprawling Islamic and anti-imperialist task (Abrahamian 1993, p. 14; Takeyh 2009, p. 88).

Iran's regime identity promoted regional change. They forged ties with Islamic movements abroad and advertised their revolutionary credentials while using this influence to

validate leadership domestically (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 7). As a revolutionary state, its ideas should go beyond borders. In other words, Iran employs religion to justify its regional expansionism. By exporting its revolution, Iran aimed to guarantee the spotlight on geopolitical issues. In Khomeini's words:

‘we will export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of Islamic teachings among the enslaved nations.’ (The New York Times 8/4/1987)

Like the US's case, the Iranian identity's ideational character incites a manicheist understanding of international politics. Because Iran embodied and represented the Islamic virtue, any adversary is naturally a force of disbelief (Takeyh 2009, pp. 88–89). Exceptionalism ingrains binary understandings that any actor denying Iran's aspired regional role is an enemy, a threat. Because it promoted the Iranian republic as a moral opposition to the Pahlavi regime, the new leaders quickly found its most significant threat in its previous best friend, the United States. Hence, the Shah and Washington alliance was, for the revolutionaries, the epitome of the exploitative nature of ties between imperialists and corrupt leaders.

In a nutshell, the Iranian regime identity understood its role as an anti-systemic, pan-Islamist, and anti-imperialist regional leader. Thus, it pushed for a grand strategy provided with a Shia-informed and anti-American connotation. Moreover, this identity instigated open denunciations of Islam's enemies and advised against ties with either West or East. After all, the sentence ‘opposition to all forms of authoritarianism, colonialism, and imperialism’ is in the Iranian constitution. Hence, this variable urges the promotion of Islamic revolutions, support of actors against the United States, and criticism of regional actors' ties with the West.

5.4.2.3 Saudi Arabian regime identity

Saudi Arabia identified itself as a conservative Islamic leader, highly suspicious of change or foreign ideologies. This role emanated from tribal, territorial, and historical elements related to Al Saud's alliance with Wahhabism. This variable reveals that three events (the Iranian Revolution, Shia protests, and the Siege of Mecca) provoked ontological distress and forced the regime to give its identity a new sectarian distinction to maintain cognitive coherence. An ontological threat happens when an actor loses the distinctiveness that separates it from others (Darwich 2014, p. 10). In these situations, it can modify its core identity to re-establish

distinctiveness and return to a place of ontological security. In the following paragraphs, I argue that after 1980, the Saudi identity supported sectarian lenses for grand strategizing, filtering out options that could be understood as prioritizing Shias' influence in the region, thus, distinguishing itself from the Islamic Republic.

First, Islam gave the country an ideological distinctiveness and guaranteed the dynastical system's legitimacy (Al-Rasheed 2010). Saudi Arabia was the only country so far ruled by the Sharia alone. Understandably, the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran as an alternative to its Islamist model was a blow to Saudi Arabia's cognitive differentiation. Iran challenged Al Saud's legitimacy and could increase instability within the kingdom by offering support to Shia minorities and fostering anti-monarchical sentiments (Mabon 2016, p. 53). After all, Iran stated it represented 'the true Islam' because it was not close to the West (Fürtig 2002, p. 232). Hence, Saudi Arabia saw Iran as a militant Islamist rival challenging the monarchy with the same instruments that it legitimized its rule: Islamic values (Niblock 2006, p. 62). That set the stage for the competition of Muslims' 'hearts and minds,' which still defines much of the Saudi-Iranian relations until today (Darwich 2014; Mabon 2016; Hiro 2018).

Second, the Iranian Revolution kindled dissent among the Saudi Shia community in the Eastern province. During the *Ashura* in 1979, Saudi Shias organized strikes and riots against the political order while flaunting Khomeini's pictures.²² They were dissatisfied with the unequal distribution of wealth in the country and Wahhabism's political domination (Jones 2010, p. 218; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 151). However, the monarchy saw it primarily as Tehran's influence. Disruption was also visible during the *Hajj*, as some Iranians advertised their revolutionary ideas to other pilgrims (Niblock 2006, p. 62).

Furthermore, in November 1979, a group of radical Sunni rebels occupied Mecca's Grand Mosque. The siege's leaders contended that the monarchy was embracing Western-style modernity and ideology, becoming corrupt by materialism and incapable of acting as just Muslim rulers (Jones 2010, p. 218; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 139). The event tested the regime's commitment to Wahhabism while forcing the rulers to reassess the country's modernization pace. Most importantly, the siege shocked the Muslims worldwide, and it took the national forces two weeks and foreign assistance to defeat the rioters.

²² For Shia Muslims, Ashura, the tenth day of the first Muslim calendar's month, is a sacred day of mourning and martyrdom, representing the death of Iman Husein in Karbala.

To re-establish its political-religious legitimacy, Saudi Arabia cast their lot with the conservative Sunnis and adopted more substantial religious austerity (Jones 2010, p. 238). Internationally, the regime absorbed a sectarian discourse to discredit the Iranian Islamic narrative (Niblock 2006; Darwich 2014).²³ Thus, I argue that after 1980 the regime identity began to provide two cognitive lenses: pan-Islamist and sectarian. While the pan-Islamist lens oriented policymakers towards protecting *all* Muslims, the sectarian lens distinguished the Sunnis from the Shias, privileging the first. In this context, Saudi Arabia often charged Iran with being solely Shia, not representing the entire *ummah* (Hiro 2018, p. 82). Via the instrumentalization of a sectarian language, the monarchy could take advantage of popular anti-Shia sentiments among Sunnis in the Arab world (Darwich 2014, p. 15; Hiro 2018, p. 64).

In a nutshell, the identity after 1979 had a new layer of complexity by providing two different lenses from which the FPE could interpret the regime's cognitive function. Both the pan-Islamist and the sectarian lens understood Saudi Arabia as an Islamic leader, an actor that should be involved in the global *ummah's* decisions to protect the faith worldwide. They also understood that a sense of vulnerability permeated the regime, making them fearful of regional instability, such as the ongoing Iran-Iraq war, and external ideologies, like communism or Iran's Islamism. Therefore, this variable filtered out measures considered against Muslims or that threatened the regional order. As the FPE section shows, the sectarian lens was the predominant one during the selected period. It oriented the king toward a zero-sum understanding of geopolitics in which Shia empowerment was a potential menace to the Sunni dominance.

5.4.3 *Third intervening variable: foreign policy executives*

- It is the agency variable, indicating leaders' tendencies and preferences regarding foreign policy.
- It describes how those in charge of foreign policy perceive the systemic environment, which interpretative lenses for the regime identity they employ and what are their political inclinations.
- It tilts the country's international behavior in the direction of the FPE's worldviews.

²³ The sectarian move also aimed to appease domestic criticism and restore the Al Saud legitimacy rule by reaffirming its capacity to reconcile the sudden wealth, economic modernization, and adherence to Islam Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 139. For that, the monarchy strengthened the Ulama's power and allowed them to impose a stricter Wahhabi code of social conduct with excluding attitude towards women and Shias Al-Rasheed 2013; Darwich 2014, p. 16.

5.4.3.1 US's foreign policy executives

There were two administrations during the selected period: the Democrat Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) and the Republican Ronald Reagan (1981-1989).²⁴ The analysis shows that the Democrat president was compelled to rearrange the Persian Gulf strategy as the Iran Revolution restrained the strategic environment. It also shows how specific decisions were linked to his internationalist-progressive preference. In contrast, the Republican president's dualistic perception of international relations and nationalist tendencies explains other key decisions, such as supporting Iraq in the war and further isolating Iran.

As presented in the last chapter, Carter is associated with the internationalist-progressive interpretation of the US's identity. That meant he believed that liberal values should be promoted internationally as a benign model or an example to be followed (Dueck 2006, p. 33). Under this optic, Carter perceived the Shah's interest to follow the US's modernization as something that brought the two countries together. After the Shah's departure, Carter believed it was still possible to negotiate with Iran as both were interested in checking communism (Yetiv 2008, p. 45). Moreover, because the administration linked itself with promoting human rights, the president was cautious about opposing the popular revolution immediately (Seliktar 2012).

However, the turning point was the Shah's request for shelter during medical treatment. Realists in the Pentagon and the State Department advised that this could endanger the US's already weakened position in Iran. Nevertheless, prominent internationalists, including Carter, felt 'torn and morally ill at ease' for ignoring the monarch, who has been a friend for decades (Seliktar 2012, p. 33). The decision to accept him resulted in the US embassy's invasion, altering the political game entirely (Yetiv 2008, p. 45; Seliktar 2012, p. 34). Every day passed during the hostage crisis, the more restricted became the environment for diplomatic solutions, and many Americans called for military intervention. According to Oren (2007, p. 546), Carter approached the hostage first by attempting to establish back channels with Tehran's moderates 'based on equality, mutual respect, and friendship' and later resorting to shutting down diplomatic ties, freezing assets, and halting oil imports. Carter rejected military intervention, saying it would endanger the hostages or even trigger a Soviet response (Seliktar 2012, p. 34).

²⁴ President George W. H. Bush (1989-1993) was already in power when the Cold War ended, the marker of a new systemic change in the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, considering that his foreign policy decisions affect the Persian Gulf already in the third triangle context, this presidency is only described in the next chapter.

In retrospect, Takeyh (2009, p. 43) argues that Carter's caution yielded positive results, building international consensus against Iran while resisting pressures for direct conflict.

The perception that the US's position in the Persian Gulf was threatened after losing Iran increased with the Iran-Iraq war, as the administration realized it had no strong surrogate actor to protect its interests. In Carter's words, 'in recent years, the Persian Gulf has become vital to the United States and to many of our friends and allies. Over the longer term, the world's dependence on Persian Gulf oil is likely to increase' (Ronald Regan Presidential Library n.d.a). To Brzezinski, the region became the 'third central strategic zone' of the US policy, and it was imperative to develop a 'Persian Gulf security framework' (Brands 2016, p. 234). Internationalists often justified a more active policy under the narrative that protecting interests abroad is beneficial for the whole world. On a National Security Council's memorandum, it is said:

'Part of the problem is that the "we want you to be strong but not here" syndrome so evident in the area [Persian Gulf] is easy to cite against any change in US deployment patterns. Nationalist objections to US power are more easily documented than fears about its erosion! Therefore, the potential benefits from an increased presence in terms of respect, confidence, and self-confidence are not easily measured.' (Foreign Relations of the United States June 19 / 1979)

Carter said that 'we must call on the best that is in us to preserve the security of this crucial region' (Carter January 23/ 1989). The administration felt that remaining partners in the Middle East were doubtful about the US's role due to its failure to avoid the Iranian Revolution, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the hostage crisis. An NSC official said that Washington became 'a laughingstock in the region' (Seliktar 2012, p. 39). Hence, in 1979, Carter sent a mission to the Middle East to 'restore and reinforce confidence in the United States among our friends in the region' and 'begin to lay the basis for security collaboration among the US and key states' (Foreign Relations of the United States February 1979). The mission should 'forcefully express our recognition of the strategic importance of the region, its strategic location, its vital resources, and its crucial role in establishing healthy patterns of internal development and North-South relations' (Foreign Relations of the United States February 1979).

What is more, the administration was aware that Saudi Arabia was incapable of replacing Iran immediately. In an official communication, it is said that 'they [Saudis] seem to me [Secretary of Defense Brown] a military zero at this time' (Foreign Relations of the United

States July 24/ 1973). Therefore, it was necessary to respond positively to Riyadh's requests for armaments, as the 'failure to meet these needs – for the military equipment and the political support it also represents – can have a profoundly adverse impact upon our overall relationship' (Foreign Relations of the United States May 13/ 1980). After the loss of Iran, Saudi Arabia was the most crucial actor in the peninsula, but it could not alone guarantee the oil market's stability.

'the time is ripe to open the question of a new US military relationship with Saudi Arabia. This Mission believes that SAG would not only be receptive to but in fact, would welcome a change in the US Saudi military relationship. There is a little doubt that the military relationship occupies a central place in US Saudi relations (...) If we accept the premise that the security of Saudi Arabia with its vast petroleum reserves is of vital interest to the US, then it is also true that, as a concomitant of that interest, it is necessary to ensure that the military assistance program in Saudi Arabia is operated with as much efficiency and effectiveness as possible.' (Foreign Relations of the United States June 1979)

Therefore, in January 1980, the president announced a new policy, the Carter Doctrine. It stressed the region's strategic importance and asserted its political involvement by fortifying friendly governments, providing military assistance, and promoting stability (Brands 2016, p. 234). The following dialogue from a special coordination committee exposes their mindset:

'Secretary Schlesinger: But we have to develop this capability. A local display of American power is necessary. They [regional partners] feel it in their bones. They can't articulate what they want, but they have to see that we have the capacity to protect them.

Dr Brzezinski: Over the longer term, what we are talking about is an increasing American role in the area which recognizes it as vital to our national interests.

Secretary Brown: We've been acting as if we don't need a big presence in the area. First the British were there, and then the Iranians seemed strong. Now both are gone. So we may need to review our assumptions

Dr Brzezinski: We're already beginning to see the Gulf as a vital region.' (Foreign Relations of the United States May 1979).

In the President's words:

'let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.' (Carter January 23/ 1980)

Nevertheless, during the 1980 elections, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan accused Carter of being lenient in the hostage crisis, calling it a 'humiliation' and a 'stark symbol of declining US capability in the region' (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library n.d.a). Reagan portrayed Carter as an indecisive leader while promising to 'make America great again' (Seliktar 2012, p. 38; Brown 2015, p. 314). He was a staunch nationalist who believed the United States was carelessly allowing enemies' empowerment. According to Oren (2007, p. 550), the actor-turned-politician was a 'man of scarcely rigorous convictions and a great fondness of

Hollywood-spun myths.’ Building on a nostalgic recollection of the ‘greatest nation in the world’ Reagan aimed to restore the US’s supremacy built on (Williams 1987, p. 575; Brown 2015, p. 367). To him, it was vital to bolster ‘freedom, democratic capitalism,’ while weakening ‘forces on the side of Marxism-Leninism’ (Brown 2015, p. 366).

Reagan was a popular leader and a skillful communicator, finishing his second term with a high approval rating and becoming one of the most influential voices in modern conservatism (Seliktar 2012, p. 47; Kinch 2016, p. 100). His philosophy was that the United States should not have its power limited (Brands 2016). The president was in synch with the interpretation that the country’s liberal model was qualitatively better than others globally. He talked about economic superiority, national pride, and exceptionalism to attack the Soviets and justify the US’s growing international involvement in peripheral countries (Brown 2015, p. 378).

Nevertheless, Reagan’s focus on the Soviet Union and the new Cold War left little room for formulating a new policy toward Iran, thus continuing the Carter Doctrine (Kinch 2016, p. 236). Like Carter, he subscribed to the logic of open doors foreign policy, but, as a nationalist, he emphasized the cognitive function's vindicative version. In this sense, it was necessary to promote the country’s values worldwide and use, if necessary, force to protect allies and interests. During the hostage crisis, still as a candidate, Reagan was openly in favor of intervening militarily in Iran. In his perception, Iran’s hostility was an illogical rejection of the US’s superior stand. He portrayed Iran as a ‘zealous, irrational, and hateful regime’ that needed to be halted (Oren 2007, p. 545; Yetiv 2008, p. 51).

Once it was understood that Iran was not interested in aligning itself with the Soviets, Americans reduced their anxiety toward the regional order. On an NSC memorandum, advisor McFarlane informed the president that ‘Iranians have a deep historical mistrust of the USSR’ and that they ‘do not seek a close relationship. Even if more Soviet arms were available, translating that relationship into substantial political influence would not be automatic and would be resisted by powerful elements within Iran’ (US Department of State 1985). Hence, the revolution’s ‘not West, nor East’ rhetoric provided a less restrictive scenario for Reagan’s more aggressive policymaking, who, by his turn, was less tolerant of Iranian revisionism.

Therefore, Reagan tilted towards supporting Baghdad during the war despite Iraq being the stronger (and closer to the Soviets) actor. A more realist president may cautiously continue the neutrality, but Iran's rejectionist behavior was an attack on the US’s values for the

administration. According to Brands (2016, p. 237), security advisor McFarlane wrote to Reagan that ‘it is not out of political affection for Saddam Hussein, but rather because of the instability and chaos his regime’s collapse would trigger throughout the Gulf.’ On their rationale, the best scenario would be for Iran and Iraq to weaken, but they could not afford the latter to fall into the radicalization of the first (Takeyh 2009, p. 93). Moreover, they believed that if Iraq lost, the GCC countries would soon fall under Iranian influence (Yetiv 2008, p. 53). In short, Washington saw the Iraqi strongman as a barrier to Iranian expansionism, ‘thus his violations of international law were reluctantly tolerated’ in favor of the US’s interests (Takeyh 2009, p. 93).

In sum, Carter’s administration struggled more to balance its internationalism and anti-war ideas with a growing restrict environment for the US’s position in the Persian Gulf. On the contrary, Reagan’s international stand combined Manicheism, nationalism, and vindication in the process of defining the country’s priorities, leading to a more muscular tactic in the region – while keeping the core tenets of the Carter Doctrine. In other words, both administrations agreed that the United States needed to increase its role in the Persian Gulf to protect the oil market and regional partners. So, Carter developed the doctrine, and Reagan pushed it forward.

5.4.3.2 Iranian foreign policy executives

Despite the plurality of opinions and interests within the revolutionaries, the new regime quickly Islamified, with Ayatollah Khomeini becoming its chief leader. Khomeini’s political project was far more developed and cohesive than those of other groups (Kinch 2016, p. 50). He managed to defuse opposition through his leadership skills, appropriating and coopting demands from other groups, and harshly suppressing rivals via persecution and treason trials (Takeyh 2009, pp. 30–31; Moazami 2013, p. 136). For the analysis, international politics during the Islamic Republic’s first decade mostly echoed Khomeini’s interests and beliefs. That tilted the decision-making towards non-compromised rhetoric, linking the revisionist behavior and anti-imperialist identity with promoting Islamism. After all, the FPE was, essentially, composed of the same people who outlined the regime identity – there was little space for political maneuver.

Born into a family of religious scholars, Khomeini became famous for often accusing the Shah of moral and religious corruption.²⁵ The religious scholar became one of the most astute theopolitical leaders in modern history by gathering the wishes of several groups disaffected with the Shah (Moazami 2013, p. 119; Saikal 2019, p. 62). He interconnected themes of religious grievance, nationalism, and class struggle on his political lexicon. To Saikal (2019, p. 45), the ayatollah ‘exuded a mystical charisma, power, and authority, projecting a messianic, invincible, and decisive image,’ making him a leader not only for the Islamists but also for the urban middle class, bazaaris, and leftist students. Religious orthodoxy depicted him as the guardian of morality, appeasing the religious puritans, while his anti-imperialist discourse appealed to secular opposition (Moazami 2013, p. 120). Thus, he pragmatically linked faith to other grievances, moving the revolution beyond the Muslim cause and englobing other issues like foreign resentment and social-economic inequality.

Khomeini’s rhetoric combined religion with nationalism and resistance, reducing the space for more conciliatory political views. The following lines exemplify that:

‘Dear sisters and brothers, in whatever country you may live, defend your Islamic and national honor! Defend fearlessly and unhesitatingly the peoples and countries of Islam against their enemies— America, international Zionism, and all the superpowers of East and West. Loudly proclaim the crimes of the enemies of Islam. My Muslim brothers and sisters! You are aware that the superpowers of East and West are plundering all our material and other resources and have placed us in a situation of political, economic, cultural, and military dependence.’ (Khomeini 1981)

‘all the powers are intent on destroying us, and if we remain surrounded in a closed circle, we shall certainly be defeated. We must make plain our stance toward the powers and the superpowers and demonstrate to them that despite the arduous problems that burden us, our attitude to the world is dictated by our beliefs.’ (Khomeini 1981)

Still in March 1979, he managed to pass, with almost unanimity, a referendum that established the new theocratic regime.²⁶ Most of the population agreed with Khomeini that Islam was an efficient tool to fight oppression and exploitation (Moazami 2013, p. 135). He insisted on the need to export the revolution and saw himself as a crucial figure of a global Islamic movement (Kinch 2016, p. 52). By declaring that ‘all Muslim countries are a part of us’ and ‘the

²⁵ In 1963 he was arrested, triggering protests countrywide and converting him to a national hero of resistance Takeyh 2009; Moazami 2013. Freed, Khomeini was forced to exile in 1964, first in Turkey, then Iraq, and finally France, and there he became more radicalized, condemning the Shah’s ‘devilish alliance’ with the US Kinch 2016, p. 47. In France, his discourse gained much more international prominence, as ‘Neauphle-le-Château was becoming the political capital of the Iranian Revolution’ Moazami 2013, p. 132.

²⁶ Here it is important to stress that a part of the revolutionary opposition boycotted the referendum, which does not, however, invalidates the popularity of Khomeini’s discourse.

revolution [is] without borders,' Khomeini employed religious missionarism as a tool to strengthen Iran's position against enemies (Rakel 2008, p. 151; Takeyh 2009, p. 18). His cynical outlook on international relations was framed strategically to promote resistance. Moreover, he hoped to improve his prestige as an Islamist leader by attacking others associated with the West.

'If we wanted to prove to the world that the Saudi Government, these vile and ungodly Saudis, are like daggers that have always pierced the heart of the Moslems from the back, we would not have been able to do it as well as has been demonstrated by these inept and spineless leaders of the Saudi Government.' (The New York Times 8/4/1987)

Undeniably, some revolutionaries diverged from Khomeini. Among them was the first Prime Minister of the provisional government, Mehdi Bazargan, a moderate who followed the nationalist tradition of Mosaddeq (Keynough 2016, p. 110). He promoted a vision of non-alignment that prescribed working relations with the United States, the Soviets, and neighboring countries (Rakel 2008, p. 149; Takeyh 2009, p. 36). Bazargan sought not to break ties with Washington, reforming them based on respect and equality (Takeyh 2009, p. 36; Seliktar 2012, p. 52). However, the hostage crisis made his plans inviable, and he renounced. His successor, Abolhassam Banisadr, also saw his ambitions for better relations with the West frustrated by growing radicalization, and he was impeached in 1981 (Rakel 2008, p. 151). Eventually, the war consolidated the political Islamization, eliminating secular forces from the political elite. In October 1981, the cleric Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei became the new president, mostly reproducing Khomeini's views.

In a nutshell, the FPE decision-making was concentrated on Khomeini's political agenda. There was virtually no space for challenging the Supreme Leader, especially during the 1980s war. Regarding international policy, his philosophy was based on the idea that Western imperialism was a significant hazard to all Muslims and that monarchies were an illegitimate form of rule (Moazami 2013, p. 138; Kinch 2016, p. 48). As a result, the grand strategy tilted to promote and export the Islamist revolutionary narrative, confronting Western imperialism and intensifying the discourse of resistance and martyrdom.

However, Khomeini had no intention of being associated with the Shah's concentration of power, and he encouraged the creation of political factions. The goal was to preserve Khomeinism alive long after the leader's death. These political groups needed to declare allegiance to the Islamic Republic (Seliktar 2012, p. 70; Kinch 2016, p. 52). Thus, two major political camps arose: the traditionalists (or conservatives) and the reformists (or

internationalists). Among other things, they differ in how they see Iran's international relations. While conservatives argue that the country should be completely independent, the reformists defend integration with the regional system (Saikal 2019, p. 86). By the end of the decade, figures like Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Akbar Velayati started to gain political influence and developed another faction, known as the pragmatic (or moderates), which favored integration into the global economy and limited cooperation with the West (Rakel 2008, p. 152; Juneau 2015, p. 96).

Despite its emergence, Iranian factionalism became truly relevant to international politics only after Khomeini's death in June 1989. According to Rakel (2008, p. 71), the Supreme Leader had the final say on all domains during the 19. As a result, Iran's grand strategy concentrated on guaranteeing the revolution's principles and regime survival. Moreover, the war against Iraq reinforced the traditionalist approach (Kinch 2016, p. 53). Hence, during the period, decisions tended to employ a staunch anti-imperialist and anti-Western tone, prioritized independentism, and reaffirmed the global Islamic revolution's inevitability.

5.4.3.3 Saudi Arabia's foreign policy executives

The period comprised two monarchs: King Khalid (1975-1982) and King Fahd (1982-2005). Both emphasized the unity of the Al Saud family and the dynastical mechanism of consensus rule as features pushing the country away from one-man-rule monarchies. However, due to health issues, the rule was mainly in Fahd's hands. He gave continuity to the traditional 'wait and see' political preferences regarding international relations. After assessing the regional events and available options, Fahd abandoned Saudi Arabian alignment with Iran and intensified securitarian ties with the United States. That happened because he perceived that the Islamic revolutionary regime became the biggest threat to the order's continuity instead of Iraq.

King Khalid had extensive diplomatic, political, and military training, having served as the viceroy of Hijaz, an army officer during the Yemeni war, and the interior minister during King Faisal's rule. However, after his second heart surgery in 1978, he delegated most of the decision-making to Fahd, who became the de facto ruler at least for seven years before he assumed the throne (Long 1985, p. 124; Riedel 2018, p. 85). Fahd was a prominent public figure who was frequent at international meetings and had an extensive political background before becoming king (Riedel 2018, 57, 85). His rising prominence inside the kingdom led to a continuous refinement of his persona, making him more integrated into the religious regime's

costumes and expectations. Once a prince associated with yachts, expansive palaces in Europe, and a bon-vivant behavior, the political environment's restrictiveness drove Fahd to a more pious and conservative standing (Riedel 2018, p. 86; Hiro 2018, p. 84).

Fahd's political empowerment led to the rise of what is known as the Sudayri Seven or clan, an influential group of Abdulaziz's sons from the same mother, Husa al Sudayri: Fahd, Sultan, Abdul Rahman, Nayef, Turki, Salman, and Ahmed. Swiftly, the group took hold of key government posts and guaranteed a relatively cohesive decision-making process (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 251; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 143). This group is linked to a preference for an ever-stronger relationship with the United States and a harsher stance against Iran. As a result, they tend to lay off calls for affronting Washington in matters related to Palestine, for example, if that can damage the ties (Riedel 2018, p. 84). That does not mean they never defended the Palestinian cause or criticized the United States, but rather that they are prone not to do that if they feel Saudi's core interests are threatened. In this sense, the Sudayri clan presents a certain detachment from ideological commitments concerning the Islamic role in favor of a more pragmatic strategy.

The selected period was one of the most challenging in the country's history, as domestic and international pressures increased the sense of vulnerability, inflated threat perception, and demanded new strategies. First, Khalid and Fahd were surprised by the Iranian Revolution, but they did not immediately reject it. Initially, they chose not to condemn the end of the Shah's regime and sought a new diplomatic arrangement that did not harm the regional stability (Fürting 2002, p. 26; Keynoush 2016, p. 105). As discussed, Saudi Arabia's strategizing was based on the mechanism of balancing out one of the two regional actors against the other. In this sense, the revolution prompted a wait-and-see process in which the monarchy started to evaluate if Iraq was still the most direct threat or if the scenario had inverted.

First, they sought coexistence with Khomeini's regime based on their shared Islamic credentials. Reportedly, King Khalid congratulated the Ayatollah, calling 'the revolution a beginning to further closeness and understanding,' and Fahd added he had 'great respect for Iran's new leadership' (Keynoush 2016, p. 101). Fürting (2002, p. 26) claims that Saudi Arabia tried to establish a dialogue with Iran, aiming to 'pacify their powerful opponent' by 'encouraging a friendly approach.' Nevertheless, Iranian rhetoric, hostile to monarchies and the West, amplified Saudi leaders' discernment that Tehran was not interested in working relations.

As argued in the identity variable, the 1979's events provoked a sense of ontological adjustment that allowed sectarian lenses to interpret the country's identity. Gradually, Fahd assumed these sectarian lenses to regain ontological security and respond to the aggressive Iranian language.

To reaffirm Saudi Arabia's unique Islamic role, Fahd boosted his credentials as a religious leader, particularly to the Sunni community (Jones 2010, p. 221; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 145). In 1986, he changed the title 'Your Majesty the King' to 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina.' He incentivized the expansion of Islamic networks and empowered many Saudi clerics to oversee the construction of madrasas and Wahhabi educational centers worldwide (Jones 2010, p. 246). Fahd cultivated his image as a pious monarch, introducing a weekly meeting with the *ulamma*, reinvigorating the directorate for Islamic dissemination, and boosting the propaganda against Iran's Shia credentials (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 10; Niblock 2006, p. 65). In this sense, the sectarian lens oriented him, using it as a discursive tool for discrediting the Iranians and ensuring domestic appeasement after the siege.

Thus, after 'waiting and seeing,' Fahd concluded that Iran's ideological threat was more substantial than Iraq's material one. According to Okruhlik (2003, p. 115), Fahd stated that the situation in Iran was 'contrary to interests of Islam, the entire Muslim world, and the stability of the Middle East.' For him, the Iranian influence could be spread beyond borders and provoke regime change, thus destabilizing the region more than Iraq could. Moreover, the *Hajj* became a source of attrition, as Saudi Arabia accused Iran of inciting the Shias during the peregrinations. In a correspondence exchange, Khalid asked Khomeini to urge his followers to show restraint, hinting that Iranians were corrupting people in Mecca (Kramer 1987, p. 6). This perception explains the choice to support Iraq in the war (Safran 1998, p. 364; Keynoush 2016, p. 115).

Finally, it is important to stress that King Fahd invested in a more robust relationship with the United States (Long 1985, p. 123; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 156). As king, Fahd promoted Prince Sultan as the defense minister and Bandar bin Sultan as ambassador to Washington, both from the Sudayri clan. They were committed to lobbying for a better military partnership with the superpower (Keynoush 2016, p. 118). Speaking with Reagan, Fahd said he wanted to 'express my satisfaction with the steady growth of relations between our two countries' (Presidential Library and Museum 1985). The critiques of Israel were also significantly reduced, especially after Reagan supported Fahd's Fez Peace proposal in 1981 (Long 1985, p. 129).

Interestingly, Chubin and Tripp (1996, p. 10) stress that the monarchy understood the revolution and the siege as inevitable contra-reactions in Islamic societies if subjected to rapid modernization. Fahd used this realization to justify more religious control over society and boost the country's Islamic networks. Here, the FPE variable sheds light on the interlink between international and domestic strategies. Domestically, Fahd sought to enhance the regime's stability via Islamization and, internationally, via arms purchases, Islamic solidarity, and strategic coordination with the United States (Niblock 2006, p. 55; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 156). This variable is also valuable for contradicting the simplistic assumption that Saudi Arabia immediately rebuked the Iranian Revolution. As Keynoush (2016, p. 105) summarizes, Riyadh's behavior 'comprised the total of its survival strategies to cope with both Iran and American demands and only after hostile attitudes coming from Tehran did Riyadh reluctantly take tactical steps to contain Iranian actions.'

5.5 The dependent variable

The Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War undermined the harmony within the strategic triangle. The intervening variables are necessary for a detailed explanation of how the events of 1979 drove the triangle to a scenario of 'stable marriage,' with one positive relation and two negatives. The balance of power does not explain how Saudi Arabia and the United States shifted their positions towards the stronger regional actor, Iraq, which presented expansionist rhetoric and was traditionally close to the URSS. Neither does it explain why Iran chose not to align with either superpowers or constraint its ties with Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, through the NCR assessment, it is possible to explain this triangle's two tendencies: the US-Saudi special relationship development and Iran's geopolitical isolation.

The Iranian Revolution unfolded a new regime with utterly different ambitions and identity than the previous one. It became a revisionist country with an Islamist, anti-imperialist, anti-American self-image, something that provoked anxiety in both the United States and Saudi Arabia. The two remaining status quo actors were concerned with the regional order, as they previously relied on Iran. For that reason, Carter developed a policy for the Persian Gulf that designed for the United States the role of order protector. That intensified securitarian ties with the remaining monarchies, particularly with Saudi Arabia. Approving the US's decision, Saudi Arabia founded the GCC to coordinate their security interests, which included good ties with

Americans. Therefore, the Carter Doctrine and the GCC's foundation served to reduce the US's and Saudi's anxieties with regional order and simultaneously check Iranian or Soviet influence.

Initially, Washington and Riyadh FPEs showed caution in not isolating Iran immediately after the revolution, as it could otherwise benefit the Soviets. Notwithstanding, Tehran's behavior turned gradually into a menace to regional order for both actors. For the United States, the hostage crisis shaped a sense of enmity between them (Beeman 2005; Musavian 2014; Kinch 2016). It is important to stress that the sense of exceptionalism and missionaryism that pervades both US's and Iran's identities drive them to similar manicheist conclusions about their antagonism. Whereas the 'city upon a hill' perceives as its enemy any actor hampering the promotion of their open doors policy, the 'Islamic city upon a hill' frames the refusal of its regional role as an act of imperialism and repression. Thus, both countries' identities contribute to blurry decisions, obstructing the grasp of complexity and leading to miscalculations.

The new Iranian identity also clashed with Saudi Arabia's identity, and both started to compete for leadership within the *ummah*. As a result, Saudis began to employ sectarianism as a tool in the contest for the hearts and minds against Iranian militant Islamism (Darwich 2014). Conversely, Iran aimed to politicize the *Hajj*, believing it was the perfect venue for exporting the revolution and discussing with fellow Muslims anti-imperialism (Okruhlik 2003, p. 113). For Khomeini, the *Hajj* was an 'ideal stage for [Iran to] demonstrating its continued political vitality' and a 'potent instrument for undermining Saudi Arabia' (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 16). In 1987, Iranian protesters in Mecca triggered a violent reaction from Saudi police, resulting in around 400 deaths, more than 270 Iranians (Fürtig 2002, p. 48). Khomeini accused Saudi Arabia of being incapable of securing the holy cities, raging they were 'are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back' (Kramer 1996). In the sequence, demonstrators in Tehran sacked and burned the Saudi Arabia embassy, killing one diplomat. In response, the Saudis broke diplomatic relations with Iran in 1988, banning Iranians from getting a visa to perform the *Hajj* (Fürtig 2002, p. 49).

When the Iran-Iraq war began, it was clear to both the Americans and the Saudis that Iran became a significant liability for the regional order. Carter was aware that Riyadh could not assume the task alone (Seliktar 2012, p. 39; Brands 2016, p. 238). Thus, the United States started a massive arms transfer to the monarchy, boosting their forces' capacities and intensifying military cooperation and training (Niblock 2006, p. 113). Under the Carter

Doctrine, the United States sold AWACS as a ‘symbol [of its commitment] with the security of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states’ (Office of Staff Secretary n.d.). Reagan intensified these commitments, selling more advanced equipment and a range of high-tech missiles (Brands 2016, p. 238). Alongside, Saudi Arabia used its dominating role in OPEC to keep the oil prices stable despite the ongoing war between two oil producers, satisfying the United States.

King Fahd and his Sudayri brothers were determined to boost a special relationship with Washington. They understood that the Cold War rhetoric dominated Reagan’s mindset and, by promoting themselves as the West’s remaining partner against the URSS in the region, they expected the United States to commit more to their security (Long 1985, p. 125; Riedel 2018, p. 88). In his turn, Regan insisted that the ‘sale of defensive arms is not proposed as a favor to the Saudis, but because it is in America’s interest to help our friends defend themselves against the forces of radicalism and terror’ (Presidential Library and Museum 1986). Thus, Fahd praised Reagan for ‘more than anyone else, realize the extent of the importance of this equipment for strengthening my country’s security and protecting it,’ while the president valued ‘the strong and solid cooperative relationship’ and would ‘meet our responsibilities towards the pursuit of peace, security, and prosperity’ (Ronald Regan Presidential Library n.d.b).

The special relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia was hence consolidated: the first provided security and military capacitation, whereas the second guaranteed the oil flow to the West and assisted in checking revisionist ideologies.²⁷ To Niblock (2006, pp. 112–113), leaders both in Washington and Riyadh perceived the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and South Yemen and the Iran-Iraqi war as proof of an ‘arc of crisis’ jeopardizing the Persian Gulf security. Brzezinski told Prince Saud that their main common interest was the ‘belief in God and religious values, which affect the way in which we approach things’ (Foreign Relations of the United States 1979). Fahd stated that he shared the ‘view that Saudi Arabia, with its Islamic beliefs and principles, and the United States, with its ideals and values, can together find a common ground against aggression, injustice, and oppression’ (Presidential Library and Museum 1985). Thus, both actors began a collaboration towards maintaining a conservative order in the Middle East, making use of identity elements in their discourse.

²⁷ Fahd agreed on financial assistance to Reagan’s campaign against the Soviets (which included a monthly allowance to the Contras in Nicaragua), and both countries gradually increased their commitment to the Afghani mujahedins Riedel 2018, p. 90; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 154.

Concomitantly, this special relationship damaged the ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran understood that Saudi Arabia was also to blame for Western imperialism in the region (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 11). Khomeini's rhetoric was full of connotations that referred to the Saudis as 'vessels' or 'lackeys' of the US's oppression of Muslims. On his last will, he wrote: 'Saudis, may God's curse go to them, these conspirators against the House of God: they should be condemned firmly' (Khomeini 1983). This language of accusing Riyadh of being a US puppet was also visible in their competition over oil pricing and production at OPEC (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 13; Mabon 2016, p. 75). Saudi Arabia boosted its production whenever there were shortfalls to maintain prices tolerable to Western economies, further harming the Iranian economy (Fürtig 2002, p. 64). In its turn, Iran called this attitude treason to all the Muslim people (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 13).

Regarding the US-Iranian relation, it is noticeable a change in tone from Carter to Reagan. Carter's tendency towards progressivism may have restrained the administration from taking a more rigid stance defending the Shah or a military action during the hostage crisis (Takeyh 2009). In contrast, Reagan employed a nationalist lens and was not keen on a diplomatic settlement with the country that kept challenging the United States.²⁸ His nationalism also meant that the grand strategy in the region tilted towards decisions that benefited the US's interests without necessarily following a moral or internationalist principle.

That helps to grasp the Iran-Contras affair, a secret deal to sell arms to Iran via Israel to assist anti-communist forces in Nicaragua. Reagan administration concluded, erroneously, that by engaging with a moderate Iranian faction, they could push away the Soviets, and the money could be used to arm anti-communist forces in Latin America (Yetiv 2008, p. 63). When the deal came to light in 1986, people pointed to the hypocrisy of selling armaments to both belligerent sides. All Persian Gulf states were stunned by Washington's attitude (Riedel 2018, p. 96). For Iranians, it was further evidence that Washington 'was willing and able to circumvent even its own laws' to undermine them (Cook and Rawshandil 2009, p. 27). If the hostage crisis was a keystone for the Americans to see Iranians as irrational actors, the Contras' affairs further reinforced the Iranians' idea that Americans could not be trusted.

²⁸ Seliktar 2012, p. 43 remarked that the Algerians negotiating with Iran during the hostage crisis frequently warned that the newly elected president was a hardliner, which may have influenced Khomeini to finally accept a deal before Reagan's government first month.

As Iran found ways to continue resisting Iraq in the war, Saudi Arabia feared that Iraq could become a gateway for spreading the Iranian revolution, eventually reaching the monarchies. Hence, Saudi Arabia attempted to mediate the conflict with the implicit aval of the United States. To Fahd, Reagan guaranteed:

‘we share your concern that an Iranian victory is likely to put further pressure on our friends in the area’ and ‘[the United States] has limited influence with either belligerent. I would appreciate your majesty views on the prospects for Islamic mediation.’ (Ronald Regan Presidential Library n.d.b)

In 1985, Fahd visited Iran to offer help to end the war. However, Khomeini demanded Saddam’s deposal and an observer's position in Mecca and Medina, which the King was unwilling or unable to give (Fürtig 2002, p. 68). Continuously, Saudi Arabia regretted Tehran’s intransigence and accused it of being a regional destabilizer.

‘The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has tried during the past eight years to maintain normal relations with Iran in the hope of preserving links and maintaining good-neighborliness it has tolerated many acts and provocations against itself and its people. But Iran has missed no opportunity during those years to demonstrate a hostile attitude towards the Kingdom and the Arab Gulf countries.’ (United Nations 1987)

While Iran never directly threatened Saudi Arabia during the war, it attacked Saudi ships in May 1984, triggering significant US deployment to the region (Okruhlik 2003, p. 120). In addition, Saudis AWACS ambushed Iranian fighters and shot down two aircraft in June (Fürtig 2002, p. 63). It is vital to stress that Saudi Arabia and the United States entered the conflict to guarantee the status quo *ante*, providing Iraq with intelligence, arms, and protection (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 156). The first clash between the United States and Iran occurred in 1987 when Iranians hit ships under the US flag. In retaliation, the US Navy bombed drilling platforms in Reshadat (Fürtig 2002, p. 69). After that, the United States interpreted Iranian activity as evidence of dominance intention and intervened more directly in the conflict (Yetiv 2008, p. 61; Brands 2016, p. 269). In July 1989, US Vincennes accidentally shot down Iran Air Flight 655 (Cook and Rawshandil 2009, p. 27). Together with the 1953 coup and the Contras, Flight 655 became another substantial grievance in the Iranian collective memory.

By the end of the decade, the anti-American sentiments proclaimed during the revolution were consolidated in the Iranian regime identity. Iran became politically and diplomatically isolated, sharing diplomatic ties neither with Washington nor Riyadh, while the US-Saudi relations were at their strongest moment. The relations between Tehran and Washington became often described as an enmity, whereas the other two as a competition (Iran

and Saudi Arabia) and a pragmatic partnership (the United States and Saudi Arabia). While the following triangles show changing tendencies, these relationship patterns did not entirely dissipate until today.

5.6 Conclusions

The Iranian Revolution pushed the triangle towards a ‘stable marriage’ type, in which the US-Saudi Arabia relationship grew strong due to a restrictive securitarian environment, while, in contrast, the other two relations became increasingly hostile. Only by contextualizing power and scrutinizing the domestic variables can one fully grasp the process that led to this period. First, the period provoked a massive disturbance in the balance of power. In the context of the Cold War’s escalating tensions, the United States had more incentives to reinforce its power projection in strategic regions than in the 1970s. Second, the loss of its surrogate partner led the FPE to reassess its position in the region and conclude that Saudi Arabia could not guarantee Western interests alone. Thus, the Carter Doctrine broadened the US’s ambitions in the Persian Gulf, outlining for the country a role of order protection. Under this justification, the United States expanded its stable power during the period, primarily via the CENTCOM.

Nevertheless, the revolution was a hit on the US’s changeable power not only for the loss of an ally but also because Iran’s political Islam incepted anti-Americanism in the region. Iran became the epitome of a revisionist country that believes the international system is fundamentally discriminatory, promoting its form of Islamism as a tool for emancipation from Western imperialism. While Iran mainly had all its power elements reduced during the period, it also started developing a network of revisionist actors that makes it difficult to assess its regional influence and inflates others’ threat perception. For example, the revolution raised so much Saudi Arabian anxiety that it provoked ontological distress. For the first time since 1932, Saudi Arabia had a rival for the hearts and minds of Muslim people, promoting a political project that diverged immensely from the monarchical one. As a result, sectarianism became a tool for Saudi Arabia to differentiate itself from Iran and compete for Islamic leadership.

The fear of Iran exporting its revolution drove the consolidation of the US-Saudi oil-for-security alliance. It became clear to Washington that instabilities in the Persian Gulf could provoke immense disturbances in the capitalist system. Thus, it enhanced military procurements to Saudi Arabia with the intent to guarantee its security. Parallely, Saudi Arabia received the US’s backing to found the GCC, unifying the monarchies’ interest in regional stability.

Nevertheless, the isolation of Iran was not immediate, and both Carter and Fahd attempted to reach Iran out on the basis that the three were against communism. However, Khomeini's non-compromising stand reduced space for appeasement. Moreover, there were few spaces for political maneuver due to the war and Khomeini's centralized leadership. As a result, Iran's FPE mostly followed the identity orientation, promoting the revolutionary agenda and confronting Western imperialism, gradually isolating the country from its previous partners.

After 'waiting and seeing,' Saudi Arabia concluded that Iran was more hostile to stability. Crucial here is how they realized that domestic instabilities could be tackled with a harsher stand against Iran's Shia credentials. By exploring the intervening variables, the Janus-faced characteristic of Saudi Arabia's international behavior becomes evident, as it omnibalance threats from domestic, regional, and international levels (Nonemman 2005). The intervening variables also indicated that the more the US-Saudi partnership intensified, the more Iran got isolated, with Khomeini condemning the Western pawns monarchies that needed to be outed.

Like the Twin Pillar Diplomacy period, each of these three countries organized its grand strategy according to its perception of the other two's actions. The US presidents and the Saudi kings justified growing military cooperation to respond to Iran's expansionism. Conversely, the Iranian leadership promoted its revolutionary Islamism as a liberation project from unfair arrangements like the Saudi-US partnership. When it became clear that Iran would not fall under the Soviet influence, the anxiety toward the regional order in Riyadh and Washington was reduced. Influenced by his nationalism, Reagan boosted the support to Iraq as Iran's rejectionist behavior was an overall attack on the US's values. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia guaranteed for itself the position of the remaining Western pillar in the Persian Gulf, lobbying for militarization and special relations with Washington.

6. Third triangle: the *Romantic Triangle* (1989 - 2003)

This period begins with the end of the Cold War and the 1990 Gulf War, a US-led multilateral operation to force Iraq to retreat from its invasion of Kuwait. After describing the systemic change, I discuss the three countries' power: first, the stable power (geography, demography, military, economy, regime stability) and then the changeable power (state alliances, partnerships, regional appeal). In the sequence, I present the Persian Gulf balance of power throughout the selected period. After, I explore the intervening variables (status satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives), stressing their relevance to the explanative chain. The dependent variable section evaluates the triangular relationship and its tendencies. From 1989 to 2003, it was a 'romantic triangle,' with two positive relations (Iran and Saudi Arabia; Saudi Arabia and the United States) and one negative (Iran and the United States), and the tendencies were the Iran-Saudi détente and the US-Iran continuously missed attempts of rapprochement. Finally, I present the conclusions.

6.1 The Cold War's end and the Gulf War

In 1989, communism dissolved in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the Berlin wall collapsed, announcing the Cold War's end. By December 1991, the Soviet Union was gone, and the bipolarity that defined international relations had quickly vanished. The 1990s was seen as a moment of unipolarity, being Washington the Cold War winner (Layne 2006; Chollet and Goldgeier 2008). The global ideological preferences shifted towards an overwhelming assimilation of the Western capitalist values and norms (Hunter 2010, p. 4). The remaining non-Western states adopted the liberal capitalist system or were cast as 'rogue states' challenging the new order. While some interpreted this 'unipolar moment' as positive for global cooperation, others were more skeptical, fearing the US's political overextension and decline (Yetiv 2008, p. 70).

The Persian Gulf had little time to absorb these global changes as the region became the new order's first testing ground. On 2nd August 1990, Iraqi troops invaded and occupied Kuwait, forcing the royal family to escape and the military to surrender (Bronson 2006, p. 192). Saddam Hussein demanded that Kuwait forgive Iraqi war debts and accused them of deliberately

provoking an oil price collapse (Amiri et al. 2010).²⁹ Iraqis also had historical claims over Kuwait, arguing it was legitimately their territory (Brands 2004, p. 124; Freedman 2009, p. 216). If succeeded, this annexation would transform Iraqi into an oil superpower, possessing around ten percent of the world's oil reserves (Freedman 2009, p. 221).

Rapidly, President George H. W. Bush (1981-1993) formed an international consensus against Saddam to establish the principles and the means to tackle the crisis (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 11). The Europeans were anxious about another possible oil price shock and endorsed the US's call for action (Oren 2007, p. 564). On 1st August, the UNSC adopted Resolution 660, demanding an immediate withdrawal and threatening the use of military action (Abir 1993, p. 174). Moscow sided with Washington, consolidating the idea of a unipolar moment (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 13). On 2nd August, the US military and other Arab nations (Egypt, Syria, and Morocco) entered Saudi Arabian territory to begin Operation Desert Shield, a defense build-up against Iraq. On 29th November, the UNSC passed Resolution 678, demanding Saddam depart from Kuwait until 15th January 1991.

A day after the deadline, the US coalition initiated Operation Desert Storm, with an extensive aerial bombarding for forty-two days. Iraq was forced into a ceasefire on 27th February, after only four ground combat days (Lippman 2004, p. 310). Iraq's army was reduced to half its size, and its navy was destroyed (Yetiv 2008, p. 94; Freedman 2009, p. 235). The economy was shattered, and with almost no country siding with Saddam, Iraq got politically isolated. However, Saddam remained in power despite the defeat, stepping up his offensive against rebel Kurds, Shias, and other opposition (Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 88). During the 1990s, the United States framed Saddam's hostile behavior as a reason for the permanence of troops in the region, which often orchestrated rapid preventive operations against Iraq, such as the 1998 Desert Fox.

²⁹ During the Iran-Iraq war, Kuwait loaned around US\$ 50 million to Iraq. When the war ended, Baghdad's economy was devastated, desperately in need for higher oil prices, and Saddam perceived in Kuwait's overproduction an act of treason.

6.2 Independent variable: contextualized power

6.2.1 The US's power

6.2.1.1 Stable power

Without any rival able to match its military or economic capabilities, Washington had greater autonomy to spread its liberal model globally (Layne 2006; Brands 2016). The 1990s were the pinnacle of the US's economic, military, and diplomatic predominance. As before, geography provided a stable position with few military threats, and demography kept a steady growth, with no significant disturbances. The economy was thriving: the GDP growth rate went from 1,8% in 1990 to 4,1% in 2000, closing at 2,8% in 2003 (World Bank n.d.j). Whereas the GDP was US\$ 5,9 trillion in 1990, it reached US\$ 11,4 trillion in 2003 (World Bank n.d.g). The economic surge was related to low energy prices, reduced inflation, and the birth of e-commerce (Stiglitz 2002). The markets were up, and unemployment was down; innovation, globalization, and deregulation guided this expansion (Morgan 2004, p. 1023).

During the 1990s, most US politicians agreed that globalization was overwhelmingly positive (Brands 2016, p. 353). Nevertheless, the economic boom of the 1990s was concentrated in bubbles, forcing many wages down and rising income inequality, especially among migrant and black communities (Morgan 2004, p. 1039). Moreover, a recession in 2001 indicated that the economy was vulnerable to business cycles and incapable of redistributing capital more equally (Stiglitz 2002). Additionally, homeland security massively increased after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, leading to a new era of public deficits (Morgan 2004, p. 1039).

When it comes to the military, the Cold War's end indicated that it was possible to spend less, and defense budget reductions started with George H. W. Bush and accelerated with Bill Clinton (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 297). As a result, military spending went from US\$ 325,1 billion in 1990 to US\$ 298 in 1999, and there was a decrease in military personnel from 2.18 million in 1990 to 1.4 million in 2003 (World Bank n.d.c). These numbers represented an overall spending reorientation: in 1990, the military budget represented 5.6% of the GDP, 3,1% in 2001, and 3,8% in 2003 (World Bank n.d.m). However, the 9/11 attacks and the Bush decision to initiate a war against terror in the Middle East skyrocketed military spending, reaching US\$ 331,8 billion in 2001 and closing at US\$ 440,5 billion in 2003 (World Bank n.d.o).

Nevertheless, the United States was still the greatest military power, with a budget that exceeded the ten next largest powers combined (Yetiv 2008, p. 144). Moreover, it was the only country capable of projecting power in all geostrategic regions, assuming many defense commitments overseas (Dueck 2006, p. 144). Furthermore, while the government encouraged a slow and steady reduction of military spending during the 1990s, around 200,000 troops remained deployed in Western Europe and Northeast Asia (Yetiv 2008, p. 161). Moreover, the country invested continuously in modernization, procurement, and specialization.

The Gulf War initiated a new chapter in US warfare due to a combination of superior airpower, lightning-fast ground mobility, and high-tech weapons (Sick 2018, p. 244). Operation Desert Shield sedimented the United States as an extra-regional actor in the Persian Gulf because it settled around 250,000 troops, accompanied by airpower and heavy machinery in Saudi Arabia (Brands 2016, p. 303). When the war started, the coalition had at its disposal nearly 550,000 personnel, 2000 tanks, 1900 aircraft, and 100 warships (Brands 2016, p. 304). Most importantly, around 20,000 troops remained in the region (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 266). Only in Saudi Arabia, Washington kept 5,000 military personnel and 30,000 civilians, plus the Combat Air Operations Centre (Niblock 2006, p. 117). They also invested in patrol and military policing, infrastructure improvements, and the construction of logistic sites in the region (Morrissey 2016, p. 13).

In 1994, Operation Vigilant Warrior against Iraq sent more than 50,000 troops to the Persian Gulf, including an air carrier, a battle group, and hundreds of aircraft (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 185). Surges like those became frequent, showing the US's capability to deploy forces quickly. In 1995, Operation Desert Fox brought more troops and naval forces to Kuwait and increased military personnel in Saudi Arabia to enforce no-fly zones over Iraq (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 185; Freedman 2009, p. 297). Moreover, throughout the late 1990s, CENTCOM extended its bases and land power in Bahrain (home of the Fifth Fleet since 1995), Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Morrissey 2016, p. 9).

Hence, the United States consolidated itself as an extra-regional power by promptly allocating forces to partner countries. For example, in 1999, a new deployment sent more than 1,000 missiles against 300 Iraqi targets (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 203). Finally, President George W. Bush (2001-2009) stepped up these deployments after the 9/11 attacks to initiate his Operation Enduring Freedom against Afghanistan in October 2001. He also relocated the

permanent forces from Saudi Arabia to Kuwait and transformed Qatar's Al-Udeid base into the new CENTCOM headquarters.

6.2.1.2 Changeable power

The 'unipolar moment' symbolized for the United States a period of self-perceived superiority, high prestige, and low competition. As the only remaining superpower, Washington had a leadership position, promoting free market and liberalism worldwide and profiting from good relations with most countries (Brands 2016, p. 321). In addition, NATO's enlargement post-Cold War expanded alliances and opened new capitalist economies (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 32). Furthermore, the quick victory against Saddam via a comprehensive, UN-supported coalition emboldened the country diplomatically and politically.³⁰ In the Persian Gulf, the result was that Washington fortified its economic, diplomatic, and military relations with all the monarchies (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 20; Keynoush 2016, p. 135). It signed defense agreements with Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, ensuring the CENTCOM a combination of bases, logistical sites, and operational infrastructure (Morrissey 2016, p. 13). Hence, its prestige and influence were high among local partners (Sick 2018, p. 249).

Nevertheless, ties with the two largest Persian Gulf countries, Iran and Iraq, were still absent. They rejected the US's role as an extra-regional actor and promoted resistance and non-conformity to the regional order. Moreover, many Arabs and non-state actors became much more vocal about the US's cultural and political authority in the region, refusing solutions for the Israel-Palestinian conflict and condemning the presence of military troops (Bronson 2006, p. 203; Niblock 2006, p. 118). Among them, there was Al'Qaeda, which organized many attacks against the United States and its allies, including the 9/11. In short, anti-Americanism narratives and Islamist terrorist groups' empowerment are directly associated with the growing US power in the Persian Gulf. This argument reinforces the idea that the United States is an extra-regional actor, as its security is somewhat linked to other actors within the system.

³⁰ Twenty-seven countries provided forces, and others, like Japan and Germany, offered financial assistance.

6.2.2 Iranian power

6.2.2.1 Stable power

By the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Khomeini was on his deathbed, and the country was internationally isolated while under economic and military hardship. Many feared that the leader's death could be the regime's end (Seliktar 2012, p. 153; Saikal 2019, p. 131). Eventually, in June 1989, he died, and a transfer of power was set into motion, guaranteeing the continuation of the theocratic regime in the hands of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the new *velayat-e faqih*. On 28th July 1989, a constitutional reform eliminated the Prime Minister position and rearranged presidential obligations. These measures increased the power of the government's electable executive branch (Ehteshami 2014, p. 286). Thus, by the eve of the 1990s, the Islamic Republic of Iran's political system was consolidated.

Years of war meant that Iran began the 1990s under economic distress (Yetiv 2008, p. 73; Seliktar 2012, p. 71). The GDP dropped from US\$ 124,8 billion in 1990 to US\$ 63.7 billion in 1993. With the increase in oil prices in 2001, the GDP started to grow, closing the period at US\$ 153.5 billion in 2003 (World Bank n.d.e). The GDP growth rate fluctuated: 13,8% in 1989, -1.5%, in 1994, and 8.7% in 2003 (World Bank n.d.h). Nevertheless, the currency kept losing value, making foreign debts higher and higher (Seliktar 2012, p. 72). Despite reform plans aiming to deregulate and privatize, international embargos and low oil prices led to a decade of rampant inflation, budget payment problems, increasing foreign debt, stagflation, and uneven economic development (Takeyh 2009, p. 103; Saikal 2019, p. 130). Iran struggled with unemployment, feeble health and education sectors, and social inequality (Arjomand 2009, p. 59).

Militarily, the isolation during the war pushed Iran towards a defense build-up focused on self-reliance and deterrence (Keynoush 2016, p. 130; Saikal 2019, p. 144). Iran opted for acquiring denial and retaliatory capabilities, such as long-range ballistic missiles and anti-ship and air defense systems (Ward 2009, p. 309). However, the economic hardship made it impossible for immediate reconstruction of the military power (Arjomand 2009, p. 58; Ward 2009, p. 308). The defense expenditure reflected the revenue variation throughout the decade, ranging from US\$ 16,4 billion in 1990, US\$ 1,4 billion in 1994, and US\$ 3,7 billion in 2003 (World Bank n.d.n). That is because the Iranian government gave centrality to economic recovery, limiting the military budget to under 2,3% of the total GDP yearly (World Bank n.d.k).

Tehran developed techniques for rebuilding and repairing existing military equipment to overcome the international embargos (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 21; Ward 2009, p. 309). It invested in deterrence capacitation and asymmetric warfare, including guerrilla tactics, proxy forces, and intense training (Saikal 2019, p. 146). The goal is to make it as hard and expensive as possible for others to attack them. Russia, North Korea, and China provided technology for ballistic missiles (Pollack 2005, p. 258; Keynoush 2016, p. 35). Moreover, in 1995, Moscow signed a deal to rebuild the Bushehr nuclear power plant, deactivated in 1979. As a nuclear program provides strong deterrence capabilities and can reduce oil dependency, Iran started to expand its research activities on dual-use nuclear technologies (Ward 2009, p. 320). That began to snatch international concern, becoming a central issue during the fourth triangle.

Iran had the size, population, and geopolitical importance to become a regional power. Nevertheless, it lacked organizational cohesion, a strong air force, and other conventional capabilities (Saikal 2019, p. 145). It had an advantage in military personal, with 440 thousand in 1990 and 580 thousand in 2003 (World Bank n.d.a). Moreover, the IRGC kept growing in size, funds, and influence, primarily via its additional branches, the elite Quds Force and the Basij Resistance Forces, a voluntary force reserve (Arjomand 2009, p. 59; Ward 2009, p. 306). The IRGC has an instrumental role in Iranian security architecture due to its ties with regional actors and economic activities (Arjomand 2009, p. 61; Keynoush 2016, p. 132). Nevertheless, the dual military structure was also a stumbling block to the forces' professionalization and overall improvement (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2007; Ward 2009, p. 304; Saikal 2019, p. 149). In conclusion, for military and economic reasons, Iran cannot be classified as a regional power during the period.

6.2.2.2 Changeable power

Iran's international position improved in the 1990s due to four related factors. First, by condemning the Iraqi invasion and maintaining neutrality during the war, Tehran created the necessary preconditions to normalize relations with the GCC. Second, in December 1991, the United Nations declared Iraq as the aggressor of the Iran-Iraq war, ultimately endorsing Iran's long claims. Third, the country enhanced its political image by resuming diplomatic ties with many regional actors, hosting the 1997 Organization of the Islamic Conference, and signing economic and securitarian cooperation agreements with China in 1990, Turkey in 1992, and Pakistan in 1995. Finally, at the UN General Assembly meeting in 1998, president Khatami

(1997-2005) proposed a global dialogue among civilizations, an antithesis of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, which other countries warmly embraced (Seliktar 2012, p. 124). Thus, by the eve of the 2000s, Iran was not the internationally isolated actor it was in the 1980s.

Iran mended ties with European countries and expanded economic, energy, and securitarian ties with the Islamic ex-Soviet states (Musavian 2014, p. 149; Saikal 2019, p. 189). It also resumed diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in 1991. By the end of the period, Tehran had diplomatic representation in almost all the Persian Gulf states but Iraq (Singer et al. 1972). Simultaneously, it continued to have regional appeal due to its anti-imperialist and resistance rhetoric. In 1991, it held an international conference on Palestine as a reaction to the Madrid Conference, hosting many actors against Israeli policies (Pollack 2005, p. 254; Keynoush 2016, p. 132). Moreover, it kept pace with Islamist groups, supporting, one way or another, groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, Algerian Front Islamique du Salut, Palestinian Hamas, Jordanian Islamic Jihad, and Tunisian al-Nahda Party (Ehteshami 2014, p. 287).

It is crucial to point out the economic and military links IRGC developed through the 1980s and the 1990s with countries like Syria, Pakistan, and Sudan. According to Ward (2009, p. 303), the Quds force became an elite unit that conducted operations inside and outside the country, collecting strategic intelligence and providing financial support to other Islamists. Moreover, the IRGC has built networks with subnational, ethnic, religious, and political groups, establishing relationships that expanded Iran's strategic reach (Saikal 2019, p. 149). That is a crucial point of Iran's power: it intertwines stable and changeable powers to increase its position and influence within the region. By ensuring alliances with other revisionist groups, Iran increased its strategic clout while enhancing the popularity of its regime's ideology.

6.2.3 Saudi Arabia's power

6.2.3.1 Stable power

Riyadh entered the decade with a substantially weaker financial position than in the 1980s (Niblock 2006, p. 68). It faced mounting budget deficits, international debt, and reduced capital reserves due to low oil prices. Moreover, they had to assume most of Desert Storm's costs and pay for arms contracts arranged before the conflict, amounting to around US\$ 60 billion

(Wynbrandt 2004, p. 254; Bronson 2006, p. 206).³¹ Forced to borrow from the IMF for the first time in 1991, the kingdom's foreign debt exceeded US\$ 25 billion in 2000, or 15.3% of their GDP (Abir 1993, p. 205; McLean 2001, p. 51). This second decade of low oil prices resulted in a cash flow drainage, low infrastructure investment, and unemployment (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 268). As a result, the GDP growth rate went from 15,1% in 1990 to 2,8% in 2002, with the total GDP growing respectively from US\$ 117,6 billion to US\$ 146,7 billion (World Bank n.d.i). As the oil prices started to increase in the 2000s, the economy warmed, closing the period with a growth rate of 11,2% and a total GDP of US\$ 214,8 billion in 2003 (World Bank n.d.i).

The demographic boom of the 1970s and 1980s began to pressure the economy as around 50% of the population was under 15 years old (Okruhlik 2003, p. 117). Nevertheless, the populational growth rate continued to be relatively high: 1.9% in 1998 and 2.9% in 2003 (World Bank n.d.r). The elevated natality is a persistent socioeconomic problem for Saudi Arabia, as successive younger generations get increasingly marginalized and dependent on welfare state benefits (Long 2004, p. 32). Moreover, people complained about economic mismanagement, inefficient defense spending, and the US soldiers' permanence in their territory (Long 2004, p. 32; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 159). Many disillusioned young Saudis joined fundamentalist groups such as Al Qaeda to express their frustration (Abir 1993, p. 186).

Pressured, the King published the Basic Law of Government in 1992, which set, for the first time, the responsibilities of the governing institutions (Niblock 2006, p. 81). While the document appeased the *ulammas* by reinforcing the link between the family and conservative religious values, it did not satisfy fundamentalists such as Osama bin Ladin, which kept accusing the monarchs of political and religious corruption (Abir 1993, p. 181; Long 2004, p. 32). Between 1995 and the end of the selected period, Saudi Arabia had to grapple with growing terrorist attacks in its territory, especially against foreigners.³²

³¹ The costs were from different kinds: direct subvention to the countries that had sent troops, loans to others, especially to the Kuwaitis that took refuge in Saudi Arabia, logistical support for the coalition forces based in Saudi territory, repair of Kuwaiti and Saudi infrastructure damaged in the war, and the costs of the operations of its own forces Long 2004, p. 68.

³² For example, in November 1998, a car bomb killed Americans and Indians citizens by National Guard's offices in Riyadh; in June 1996, a truck bomb at the Khobar Towers in Dhahran killed nineteen US military; in 2002, car bomb attacks killed German and British nationals; in 2001, Al-Qaeda fired a missile at an American fighter at the Prince Sultan Air Base; in 2003, there was a series of bombings and shootings in expats compounds, killing local and foreign civilians.

When it comes to the military, years of high defense spending were alone insufficient to protect them during the Gulf War or from domestic terrorism (Rich 2012, p. 476; Cronin 2013, p. 24). They submitted even larger arms procurements immediately after the war, but financial troubles forced them to cancel or renegotiate contracts (Pollack 2002, p. 62; Keynoush 2016, p. 130). Thus, military expenditure reduced from US\$ 16,3 billion in 1990 to US\$ 13,3 billion in 1996, returning to increase already in 1997 (US\$ 18,1 billion) and closing the period at US\$ 18,7 billion in 2003 (World Bank n.d.o). However, these numbers represented a relatively high parcel of the GDP: 12,4% in 1990, 14,3% in 1998, and 8.6% in 2003 (World Bank n.d.l). Interestingly, the Saudis attempted to reduce their dependency on the US's arms supplies and diversify suppliers, but the strategy bared few fruits (Pollack 2002, p. 84; Cronin 2013, p. 24).

Throughout the 1990s, especially the first half of the 2000s, Saudi Arabia invested in military defense technology, particularly armor, air shield weapons, and anti-tank artillery (Cordesman 2002, 33-34, 42-44). It gathered a relatively sizeable possession of modern air defense weapons. Nevertheless, their military inventory was still the third in the region, after Iran and Iraq. Moreover, while the country managed to develop the necessary facilities, infrastructure, and equipment to support its forces in peacetime, it did not adopt a modern management system, war-fighting conditions, or adequate organization to support mobile combat operations (Cordesman 2002, p. 48). Therefore, it kept highly dependent on US security and technology, exposing difficulties in protecting itself in conflict (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 159).

Both Cronin (2013, p. 24) and Cordesman (2002) state that one of Saudi Arabia's main problems is its trouble transforming forces into genuinely national institutions disentangled from tribal origins. The army subscription is voluntary, not lucrative or career-friendly (Cronin 2013, p. 26). Thus, during the selected period, military personal remained low: 146 thousand in 1990 and 215 thousand in 2002 (World Bank n.d.b). Most importantly, the army lacked the training to operate most of the acquired equipment, prolonging foreign assistance dependence (Pollack 2002, p. 84). By 2002, the army did not have a combat brigade ready to deploy or sustain operations at any distance and showed many shortfalls in artillery and mechanics (Cordesman 2002, p. 50). Thus, Saudi Arabia also could not be classified as a regional power.

6.2.3.2 Changeable power

The new political configuration opened space for resuming relations with Russia, China, and the newly unified Yemen (Keynoush 2016, p. 126). Saudi Arabia also resumed diplomatic

ties with Iran and signed the Damascus Pact with Egypt and Syria (1999), improving their overall regional reach. In addition, it signed a border agreement with Yemen in 2000, a free-trade agreement with Syria in 2001, and a customs union with the GCC members in 2003 (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 270). Nevertheless, the Gulf War also exposed the GCC's inability to adopt a unified defense posture in the region (Gause 1994, p. 129; Rich 2012, p. 476). As a result, all GCC countries became more dependent on bilateral security agreements with Washington (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 157). For Saudi Arabia, it was a knife of two edges: on the one hand, that weakened the organization as a collective security initiative, and, on the other hand, it guaranteed the US's commitment to the regional order.

By receiving the US troops, Saudi Arabia's ties with the Americans increased. At the end of 2001, 316 Americans worked in military training missions in Saudi Arabia as well as 10 Marines, 21 Navy, and 81 Air Force personnel (Cordesman 2002, p. 48). That provided the monarchy a sense of security in the post-Cold War scenario, as it upheld its strategic relevance to the superpower (Riedel 2018, p. 129; Wright and Bashir, 110). However, that did not come without controversy. Many Saudis and other regional actors saw the US's role as increasingly invasive and not in favor of Muslim interests. The period was marked by a growing anti-Americanism in the Islamic world (Niblock 2006, p. 73). Hence, by hosting the troops and increasing its military dependence on Americans, the Saudi monarchy was accused of subservience and Islamic deviance, diminishing its regional appeal.

Finally, the US-Saudi relationship was shaken by the 9/11 events, as a wave of harshly critical commentary from journalists and politicians stressed the limits of the two countries' cooperation (Pollack 2002, p. 89). Considering that most of the terrorists were of Saudi Arabian nationality, Washington imposed visa restrictions, froze assets of various Islamic charities, and incarcerated hundreds of Muslims in black-site prisons (Lippman 2004, p. 327).³³ Consequently, Riyadh's international image was up to contestation by the media in the aftermath of the events. Nevertheless, its political, economic, and securitarian relations with the West continued sturdy, mainly because of oil and collaboration in counterterrorism operations.

³³ Two were from the United Arab Emirates, one from Lebanon and two from Egypt.

6.3 The Persian Gulf power balance

The Gulf War was the first time Washington used the capabilities it had been developing in the region for the past decade, displaying its ability and willingness to protect the order (Yetiv 1999, p. 157). The event sedimented the bipolarity's end, improved the US's prestige, and deepened security relations with the GCC. Moreover, Washington developed a limited yet permanent military presence that could quickly be deployed if needed (Freedman 2009, p. 287; Keynoush 2016, p. 129). Thus, during the 1990s, the United States found itself in a unique relaxed position: they no longer had to worry about the Soviet Union, its military power was unmatched, and the oil prices were low, supporting capitalism's proliferation in the post-Cold War world.

Table three: comparable stable power in the region (1990-2003)

Country	GDP (current USD)			GDP growth rate			Military spending (current USD)			Military personnel		
	1990	1997	2003	1990	1997	2003	1990	1997	2003	1990	1997	2003
United States	5,96 Tn	8,57 Tn	11,46 Tn	1,9%	4,4%	2,9%	289,7 Bn	273,9 Bn	404,9 Bn	2,18 M	1,53 M	1,48 M
Iran	124,8 Bn	113,9 Bn	153,5 Bn	13,8 %	0,4%	8,7%	16,4 Bn	4,6 Bn	4,27 Bn	440 k	868 k	580 k
Saudi Arabia	117,6 Bn	166 Bn	215,8 Bn	15,1 %	1,1%	11,2 %	16,3 Bn	18,1 Bn	18,7 Bn	146 k	178 k	215 k
Iraq	178,9 Bn	-	*2004 36,6 Bn	57,8 %	21,2 %	-33%	-	-	*2004 613 M	1,34 M	442 k	432 k

Author's elaboration ³⁴

The Persian Gulf remained a multipolar system, now with a more unequal distribution of power between the regional actors and the extra-regional actor. Nevertheless, while the UN sanctions weakened Iraqi conventional capacities and the war isolated it politically, Saddam continued to represent a threat to Iran and the GCC (Bronson 2006, p. 205; Takeyh 2009, p. 138). Iraq retained around 50% percent of its pre-war military and managed to reconstitute around 28 of its 57 forces divisions (Yetiv 1999, p. 147). Interestingly, Tehran and Riyadh

³⁴ Data from Word Bank. I did not find available data for Iraq in 1990 and 1997 relating to GDP and military spending neither in the World Bank database, as well as other databases, such as SIPRI, JANES, Index Mundi, or CoW.

supported different Iraqi opposition groups hoping that they would overthrow Saddam (Bahgat 2000, p. 111).

Second, Iran significantly enhanced its changeable power during the period, improving its image and overall relations. It expanded ties with the GCC, Europe, and the ex-Soviet countries in Central Asia. Nevertheless, the growing US's presence in the Persian Gulf limited how much Iran could expand its influence without challenging the most powerful military actor (Yetiv 1999, p. 148). Moreover, the prolonged economic crisis squandered its possibilities to restore conventional edge regarding military readiness, capabilities, and effectiveness. Therefore, the period did not represent a significant increase in stable power, only changeable.

Thirdly, the 1990s symbolized a relative Saudi Arabian empowerment. Although struggling with economic hardship, Riyadh invested in its military and improved its position as a US's security partner (Yetiv 1999, p. 150; Niblock 2006, p. 68). Furthermore, unlike Iraq and Iraq, it was not grappling with war damages, political isolation, or economic sanctions. However, while it kept investing in the military, it was still behind Iran and Iraq in terms of military personnel and could not sustain extended operations or tackle a high number of casualties if needed (Yetiv 1999, p. 150). Additionally, the permanence of the US's troops harmed their image among the Arab masses, reducing some changeable power.

I argue that the 1990s was a decade of missed opportunities for improving all the relations within the triangle and develop a more sustainable, endogenous regional security. While the power asymmetry between Washington and the regional countries was massive, the power balance was more symmetrical among the local actors. In the following pages, I show that both status quo actors, Saudi Arabia and the United States, were interested in improving relations with Iran due to their new threat assessments. Nevertheless, only Saudi Arabia managed to find a *modus vivendi* with Iran. In contrast, the United States and Iran continued within a hostile interaction despite showing an interest in reducing animosities. Therefore, to explain why the triangulation evolved from a 'stable marriage' to a 'romantic triangle' instead of returning to a 'ménage à trois,' it is necessary to explore the intervening variables.

6.4 The intervening variables

6.4.1 First intervening variable: status satisfaction

- It showcases the country's ambitions toward the system.

- The ideational variable discusses if a country's perception of its ascribed status matches its aspired status.
- It shifts the parameters towards revisionism or continuity.

6.4.1.1 US's status satisfaction

During the Cold War, the US's status community was the Western world: it was the capitalist bloc's leader, promoting its political-economic model as the one to be followed. The bipolarity's end led to the expansion of the US's status community. Now, its status community was not only in the West but the whole world, where its liberal, capitalist, and democratic model should be universalized. The ambition to promote its political experiment as the unequivocal solution to the world's problems pushed Washington to expand its global reach. After the success in Kuwait, President George H. W. Bush's 'new order' seemed to be launched, in which the United States consolidated itself as the most powerful country in the world. In this scenario, it saw itself as the benevolent leader that won the Cold War. President Clinton later coined the term 'indispensable nation,' labeling the United States as an actor that could not 'allow itself to be challenged with impunity by much less well-endowed political actors' (Onea 2012, p. 152).

However, adapting to the polarity change was tricky, with a general sense of confusion regarding the US's global role (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008). The absence of a clear rival made the United States hyper-sensitive to any contestation or rejection of their superpower position (Onea 2012, p. 152). Those who disagreed with the US's model were classified as rogue nations that threatened the world order. Consequently, throughout the decade, Washington behaved as a 'worried sheriff' trying to impose its dominance everywhere it could (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 131). The narrative of indispensability urged their involvement in successive conflicts such as in Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, and Somalia – with mixed results, to say at least.

The Persian Gulf is crucial to the capitalist system as a stable oil market is a prerequisite to universalizing liberal economic values (Brands 2016, p. 301). Hence, a favorable balance of power in the region with no hegemonic powers contesting the US's interests is seen as essential (Yetiv 2008, p. 91; Musavian 2014, p. 89). After the war, the military presence provided Washington with the needed power to guarantee such objectives. No other country could allocate such a level of force and as quickly as them to the Persian Gulf (Edwards 2013, p. 13; Kinch 2016, p. 97). In addition, the GCC countries embraced the superpower's position as the Persian Gulf's protector, increasing securitarian ties and reinforcing the idea that the

environment was permissive for Washington to exercise its influence. Contributing to this perception was that most Middle Eastern countries supported the war against Iraq, implying that the US's ambitions matched the ascribed status.

Thus, this variable suggests that the United States was overall satisfied with its ascribed position. To Onega (2012, p. 150), the fact that the war was via a large global coalition confirmed that the United States enjoyed significant political influence. Nevertheless, Iran and Iraq rejected that position. For that reason, Washington started to call them 'pariah states' or 'rogue states,' which needed to be contained or even barred from the security architecture because they provoked order disruption (Yetiv 2008, p. 92; Edwards 2013, p. 115). An eventual subscription of those two actors into the existing order could improve the US's status satisfaction. Nonetheless, the disproportional power distribution between Washington, Tehran, and Baghdad meant that the first could draw policies that excluded the last two from its security arrangements.

In sum, the United States assumed a global leadership role based on the idea that it was an indispensable nation. As a bastion to the capitalist, democratic, and individualist development model, they should prevent any hegemon from dominating strategic geopolitical regions such as the Persian Gulf because that would threaten the unipolar status quo. However, as other variables further discuss, the propensity to see international politics as an ideological battle and the absence of a competitor reduced systemic clarity. Chollet and Goldgeier (2008, p. 71) even argue there was 'a misplaced nostalgia for the simplicity of the Cold War and containment.' Hence, this variable shows that the United States did not alter its ambitions toward the system during the unipolarity moment, which created an unmanageable task for the international community in which every act of defiance could lead to threat inflation.

6.4.1.2 Iranian status satisfaction

Iran has aspired to be a dominant power in the Persian Gulf, essential in a range of regional affairs, such as the economy, policy, and security. However, it was a revisionist actor, as it believed actors within its status community denied or did not recognize this deserved position. In other words, there was a gap between its status aspiration and status ascription. For this selection, the Gulf War did not alter Iran's ambitions towards the system nor its status satisfaction but affected how permissive it perceived the regional environment. In a nutshell, the 1990s represented a duality for Iran's environment assessment: on the one hand, Iraq was

isolated, improving Iran's position and changeable power; on the other hand, the increased US's presence in the Persian Gulf was received as detrimental to Iran's overall ambitions.

After a decade of war and isolation, Iranians were convinced that self-reliance was mandatory for regime survival, which depended on reinserting the country into the global economy, reducing sanctions, and attracting capital (Byman et al. 2001, p. 8; Takeyh 2009, p. 82). Reintegrate the country into the international system called for a more pragmatic and less isolationist stance that protected the country from threats and domestic instability. Therefore, I detect a recalculation of preferences within the Iranian's status ambitions. While exporting the revolution was ideal, this should not be a factor in keeping Iran ostracized or threatened. According to Takeyh (2009, p. 131), Foreign Minister Javad Larijani said that every country should be 'accepted as it was' and that Iran did not need to provoke regime changes. Thus, Iran turned to a pragmatic, often textbook Neoclassical Realist assessment of international relations in which ideational motivations are only possible after security is guaranteed.

Iran's ambitions for the regional system were to be an active player in constructing an endogenous securitarian architecture (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 18; Takeyh 2009, p. 137). Iran was strongly averse to extra-regional actors' interference, particularly the United States. Therefore, it started to promote the idea of a cooperative regional security arrangement in which local actors would partner up to make decisions without foreign involvement. They believed Washington had repeatedly disturbed the Persian Gulf's stability and acted against Muslim people's interests (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 6; McLean 2001, p. 25). Central here is that this ideal regional structure would remove the US's troops, reduce isolation, increase economic and securitarian cooperation, and eliminate many barriers to Iran's leadership position.

However, the fact that the Gulf War brought more than seven hundred thousand American troops restricted the Iranian environment perception. Moreover, the coalition did not overthrow Saddam, who continued to be a lurking threat, disagreeing with Tehran throughout the period over reparations, prisoner exchanges, and border demarcation (Takeyh 2009, p. 130). Thus, these two elements increased the country's threat perception. Nevertheless, the reassumption of diplomatic ties with regional and international actors indicated that the international society was more willing to accommodate Iran. Regionally, it worked actively to improve its global integration by reducing the export the revolution discourse. Additionally, Iran

felt vindicated by Saddam's isolation since 1990 (Keynoush 2016, p. 126). These elements increased its changeable power, reducing isolation and enhancing the perceived ascribed status.

It is important to stress that the export of the revolution rhetoric was not abandoned but turned into a facultative feature that could be replaced by fostering Iran's political experiment as an example to be emulated (Fürting 2002, p. 95). In a nutshell, as the opportunities for revolutionary advances were limited during the unipolar moment, more diplomacy was needed to ensure Iran's national interests (Gause 2014, p. 12). However, despite changes, most local countries kept turning to the Americans for bilateral security deals instead of constructing a regional solution that included Tehran. Eventually, Iran felt that its efforts were not rewarded (McLean 2001, p. 25; Takeyh 2009, p. 137; Keynoush 2016, p. 133). Therefore, Iran continued to be dissatisfied with its ascribed status, continuing a grand strategy guided by revisionism.

In conclusion, although its position had improved, the status community kept rejecting the leadership position Iranians believed was naturally theirs. In other words, the regional order continued to be strongly oriented toward Western interests. Hence, Iran kept dissatisfied with the ascribed status and the variable pushing for a revisionist behavior. Nevertheless, the perception of an empowered United States forced Iranians to recalculate their set of available options with caution, as the system was restrictive to anti-imperialist or revolutionary discourse. Thus, the revisionist behavior gained a pragmatic undertone that accepted occasional accommodation.

6.4.1.3 Saudi Arabian status satisfaction

Saudi Arabia idealized a system in which an extra-regional actor protects the Persian Gulf stability by checking the emergence of a hegemon and maintaining a favorable balance of power. This variable shows that the weakening of Iran and Iraq after a decade of fighting reduced Saudi Arabia's concerns toward the order and improved its position in the balance of power. Moreover, while Riyadh feared its geostrategic relevance would be reduced with the end of the Cold War (Long 2004, p. 32), the US's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia reaffirmed the kingdom's importance in a post-bipolarity world. In President George H. W. Bush's words, 'the security of Saudi Arabia is vital – basically fundamental – to US interests and really to the interests of the Western world' (Brands 2016, p. 122). Thus, by deploying the troops to protect the regional partners and installing permanent training centers in the kingdom, the United States reaffirmed the Carter Doctrine, reducing Saudi Arabia's fears of order disturbance.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, Riyadh was aware it did not share the natural strength of Iraq or Iran, relying on a policy of balancing one against the other (Aarts and van Duijne 2009, p. 66). After the systemic change, Saudi Arabia reviewed its strategy to reassess if Iran continued to be the more significant threat to the order. First, they believed the US's decision not to overthrow Saddam increased the Iraqi threat. After the war, his rhetoric became more aggressive and triumphalist, boosting a pan-Arabist project (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 154; Keynoush 2016, p. 128). Second, Iran reduced its revolutionary discourse and improved relations with local actors, showing more willingness to adjust to the regional order. Third, both Tehran and Riyadh shared the perception that Iraq was a challenge to local security. Hence, the conclusion was that Iraq was the most significant threat and not Iran (Gause 1994, p. 134; Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 13). In other words, the systemic change opened an opportunity window for improving the Saudi-Iran relations.

Thus, the systemic change altered what Saudi Arabia perceived as the most representative threat in the Persian Gulf but not change its grand strategy design. The need to omnibalance pressures from different levels (domestic, regional, international) led it to fear the most the ideological threat, not the biggest material threat— as long as the extra-regional power continues to promote the multipolar order (Nonemman 2005). Moreover, by exploring the possibilities of détente with Iran, Saudi Arabia did not become a revisionist actor. On the contrary, it continued to aspire for a security partnership position with the extra-regional power, the United States, who should, in their turn, maintain Iran's and Iraq's hegemonic ambitions checked. The improvement of ties with Iran was possible precisely because Saudi Arabia relied on the United States to guarantee order, enabling it to pursue other motivations beyond security.

In sum, during the selected period, Saudi Arabia's status satisfaction kept dependent on its security partnership with Washington (Chubin and Tripp 1996, p. 6). The reaffirmation of the US's commitments to the regional order, the Iraqi isolation, and the Iranian appeasement lessened Saudi Arabia's order anxiety. That signified a more permissive environment, allowing new strategies, including discussing regional security plans with Tehran. However, the 9/11 attacks generated excoriation and criticism towards Riyadh while domestic terrorism increased. Thus, the regional environment became once again restrictive, provoking anxiety (Long 2004, p. 33). By the end of the period, as it became clear that Washington planned to invade Iraq, Saudi Arabia refocused on its first-tier security needs.

6.4.2 Second intervening variable: regime identity

- It is the cognitive variable referring to a regime's self-perceived images.
- It provides self-schemas for coping with behavior complexity.
- It narrows the band of possibilities of action.

6.4.2.1 US's regime identity

As discussed in the previous chapters, the US's identity traces back to its independence, the Calvinists' missionarism, the enlightenment's universalism, and its 'incomparable national experience' (Monten 2005). The 'city upon a hill' myth, in which the Americans had a God's given function to promote a new world via liberal values, was intertwined with the capitalist ambition to expand market economies worldwide. The end of the Cold War reaffirmed the US's identity's principles, even if momentarily: the system reassured them that they were the 'exceptional nation.'

Policymakers must tackle this missionary identity by promoting the American values as an example to be emulated or a virtue to be globally imposed. Moreover, the identity ingrains a manicheist interpretation of international relations, leading to a tendency to see conflicts as a struggle between 'good and evil' (Edwards 2013, pp. 15–16; Kinch 2016, p. 98). A fundamental rationale for the US's grand strategy is to have a clear competitor or rival to compare their values and confirm their superiority. In the analysis so far, the American creed (individualism, capitalism, liberalism, and democracy) opposed the Soviet creed. However, in the 1990s, there was no apparent evil, provoking inevitable ontological distress.

In other words, while the policymakers kept having access to the four cognitive lenses (internationalists, nationalists, progressives, and realists), they had also to find ways to interpret the unipolarity moment, which was a novelty due to the lack of enemies (Dueck 2006). For example, how to define what the United States is if there is no clear opposing idea of what it is not? I argue that to handle this situation, policymakers could be *optimists*, seeing the unipolarity as favorable for expanding the model via an example, or *pessimists*, perceiving the moment as a global threat expansion, in which they had to protect their way of living forcefully.

While President George H. W. Bush was a strong realist, skeptical about overly promoting the liberal model, the other two administrations had opposing views concerning unipolarity. President Clinton followed the positive line of thought, which interpreted the

unipolar moment as a signal that the world was receptive to the liberal model. Under this version, it was a matter of time for American values to become universalized. Therefore, the country's function was no longer to check the influence of the 'red blob,' but to expand the 'blue blob' of liberal democracies via institutions, policies, and even multilateral imposition (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 67).

A pessimist interpretation detected the increasing globalization as a process that multiplied threats and enemies, endangering the American creed's long-term hegemony. This view pushed the policymakers to inflate threat perception and the definition of enemies, which could be any revisionist or non-conformist state, anti-imperialist ideology, or even the potential emergence of hostile actors, state or non-state (Dueck 2006, p. 119). President George W. Bush, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, aligned with this interpretation, which helped him build his war against terror policy.

6.4.2.2 Iranian regime identity

Since the revolution, Iran's identity has been based on political Islam's values, Shia's endurance and resilience, and anti-imperialist sentiments. They saw themselves as revolutionary trailblazers, leaders of Muslim emancipation. The ideational identity pushes leaders towards alliances that could increase Iran's influence over hearts and minds, project the country as an independent regional leader, and reduce any local Western appeal. However, the war against Iraq consolidated a new element to this identity: independentism. This element prescribed that Iran cannot count on any external actor to maintain its regime, just itself. Hence, I argue that this new layer within the identity allowed two cognitive lenses: *pragmatic* and *ideological*.

The perception that it was necessary not to depend on anyone, as every country had failed to be reliable during the war, institutionalized the Iranian identity (Kinch 2016, p. 61). As mentioned, by 1989, many questioned whether the republic would recover from a decade of war, economic hardship, and Khomeini's death (Abrahamian 2008). These elements forced the Iranian political elite to refocus on regime survival, enabling pragmatic interpretations of the idea of spreading revolutionary beliefs. This pragmatic lens enabled the FPE to claim that Islamist missionaryism could not be feasible when the environment was too restrictive. According to Saikal (2019, p. 94), the pragmatic interpretation of the identity is conceivable without ontological distress as the republic's heterodox dual-system permitted certain adjustments without eroding the theocratic foundations.

Conversely, the ideological lens focuses on the resistance rhetoric, following the manicheist understanding of international politics, where an apparent evil is to be fought (Beeman 2005; Kinch 2016). During the selected period, these lenses are linked with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. In Opposition, the pragmatic lens reduces the revolutionary rhetoric to favor strategic policies that could improve regime survival, domestic stability, or regional power. Thus, leaders that assume a pragmatic interpretation focus more on independentism and regime stability than exporting the revolution or promoting religious rivalry. The two presidencies in this period, Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami (1997-2005), employed pragmatic lenses.

Most importantly, the pragmatic lens does not abandon the revolutionary principles of 1979. Both cognitive interpretations foster Iran as a revisionist regional leader with religious leadership aspirations. They also promote Iran as a genuine regional leader safeguarding Muslims everywhere (independently of the sect), fighting injustice, oppression, and imperialism – primarily when the fight was against the ‘Great Satan,’ the United States. Nevertheless, the pragmatic lens orients against policies that can erode the regime’s authenticity and survival, while the ideological lens is much more risk-prone.

6.4.2.3 Saudi Arabian regime identity

Saudi Arabia’s regime identity did not vary in the selected period: the regime saw itself as a conservative Islamic leader seeking extra-regional protection. Like in US’s and Iran’s cases, the identity has an ideational characteristic that encourages international goals beyond security. For the Saudis, this ideational goal is Islamic leadership, an essential element for regime stability because it legitimizes dynastical rule. This identity is also linked to a sense of suspicion towards other foreign ideologies or revisionist movements, showing a strong conservative tendency. That relates to the system the dynasty uses to legitimate its rule, the subscription to Wahhabism, and a tribal worldview in which neighbors were a constant source of threats (Kechichian 2000; Long 2009).

In the explanative chain, this variable filters out strategies that can reduce the country’s influence in the Muslim world or threaten regional stability. I argued that the FPE could follow two different cognitive lenses: the pan-Islamist and the sectarian one. While the first focuses on promoting Saudi Arabia as a guide and protector of all Muslims, the second one concerns the Sunni community, particularly separating them from the Shias or other revisionist ideologies.

When the environment is perceived as restrictive, leaders are driven towards sectarian interpretations as a way to differentiate themselves from the other regional actors and secure themselves ontologically. This way, they can gain grounds when competing for religious leadership against other non-Sunni actors, particularly Iran.

However, Saudi leaders can return to a pan-Islamic lens when the environment is less restrictive, promoting the country as a religious leader in the region for all Muslims, without distinction of sects. As the status variable indicated already, the selected period was one of environment openness. That enabled Crown Prince Abdullah (1982-2005) to reduce the previously sectarian foreign policy discourse toward Iran and push for a rhetoric of mutual coexistence, shared interests, and combined goals between Muslims (Kechichian 2000; Okruhlik 2003). Thus, during the period, Saudi Arabia's identity enabled the improvement of ties with Iran without ontological distress. Then, Abdullah actively sought to minimize their sectarian discourse on behalf of a common goal.

6.4.3 Third intervening variable: foreign policy executives

- It is the agency variable, indicating leaders' tendencies and preferences regarding foreign policy.
- It describes how those in charge of foreign policy perceive the systemic environment, which interpretative lenses for the regime identity they employ and what are their political inclinations.
- It tilts the country's international behavior in the direction of the FPE's worldviews.

6.4.3.1 US's foreign policy executives

The selected period covers three presidencies that diverged in their enthusiasm toward the unipolarity moment: Republican George H. W. Bush (1989-1993), Democrat William Clinton (1993-2001), and Republican George W. Bush (2001-2009). The effects of these variations in the explanative chain are that each administration tilted to policies in the Persian Gulf differently, as the following paragraphs show.

President George H. W. Bush was a Cold War leader: he served as Reagan's Vice President, Ford's China ambassador, and Nixon's United Nations ambassador, among other posts (Seliktar 2012, p. 69). His experience was critical in tackling the Russian transition to the capitalist economy, the reconfiguration of the European securitarian arrangement, and the war

in Kuwait. Moreover, he is considered a quintessential realist leader (Brands 2004; Freedman 2009; Seliktar 2012). He was skeptical towards liberalism promotion, something to be tapped only when serving the country's political advantage.

George H. W. Bush saw the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War as opportunity windows to create a 'new world order,' in which Washington would shape the future according to national interests (Brands 2016, p. 301). In his words:

'the totalitarian era is passing, its old ideas blew away like leaves from an ancient, lifeless tree. A new breeze is blowing, and a nation refreshed by freedom stands ready to push on. There is new ground to be broken and new action to be taken. There are times when the future seems thick as a fog; you sit and wait, hoping the mists will lift and reveal the right path. But this is a time when the future seems a door you can walk right through into a room called tomorrow' (United States 1989).

For the administration, the Gulf War was crucial to the developments underway (Brands 2016, p. 227). Still, they saw it as an operation to restore the *status quo ante* and not a mission to spread liberal principles and values in Iraq. In a realist fashion, the administration's goal was to check Iraqi power expansion and showcase the US's power in the region while avoiding long-term political engagement. Thus, George H. W. Bush gave continuity to the Carter Doctrine, eliminating Iraq's possibility to rise as a regional hegemon while protecting local partners.

Moreover, the president was a pragmatic man, emphasizing the advantages of having working relations with influential leaders, being them inline or not with the US's values (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 31; Seliktar 2012, p. 69). In 1989, he reached out to Iran indirectly for the first time since the revolution, mentioning a hostage situation in Lebanon. Saying that 'goodwill begets goodwill,' he implied an interest in improving the relations if Tehran assisted in freeing the hostages (Edwards 2013, p. 113). Similarly, officials James Baker and Brent Scowcroft commended Iran's neutrality in the war and were vocal about taking the relationship a step further (Seliktar 2012, p. 82). This discourse focused only on beneficiating the United States, not being promoted as something for the sake of the international community or another moralist objective. Nevertheless, the Democratic majorities in Congress and the House hindered these attempts as they saw no political advantages in it (Seliktar 2012, p. 82; Edwards 2013, p. 114).

Democrats were dissatisfied with Iran's anti-Israel rhetoric. In the 1990s, Iranian opposition to the Israel-Palestine peace process was unignorable, and the Israeli lobby's activism in the United States was insistent about it. Freedman (2009, p. 298) says that the

political elite disagreed on whether the value of rapprochement with Iran was worth the ‘exasperating and fruitless negotiations that had characterized the hostage crisis and then the arms-for-hostages fiasco.’ Moreover, those linked with the Israeli lobby disapproved of the rising trade with Iran – from US\$ 54 million in 1987 to US\$750 million in 1992 (Seliktar 2012, p. 84; Edwards 2013, p. 130). Therefore, many politicians pressured the president to a harsher stand on Iran. Such pressure worked on Clinton’s first term.

Democrat candidate Bill Clinton capitalized on the image that George H. W. Bush was a president stuck in Cold War. He portrayed George H. W. Bush’s statecraft as ‘plodding, unimaginative and slow to respond to change’ (Brands 2016, p. 279). With the slogan ‘it is the economy, stupid,’ Clinton campaigned, accusing the president of caring excessively about great power competition instead of globalization and international markets. Clinton posited himself outside the realist spectrum, showing optimism toward the new international order. Hence, he interpreted the US’s identity via an internationalist lens, believing the permissive environment supported expanding liberal exceptionalism proactively. For him, it was the moment to project the United States as an ‘indispensable nation’ (Dueck 2006, p. 128).

Clinton is a Yale Law School graduate linked with the New Democrat movement, a centrist party faction that defended cultural liberalism with a more conservative stance regarding the welfare state, tax regulation, and fiscal constraints. He oversaw the country’s most prolonged economic expansion in peacetimes, and his legacy includes international accords such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Oslo accords. His staff included liberal idealists who believed the US’s role was to encourage an upwards spire of global prosperity, human rights promotion, and market integration (Dueck 2006, pp. 129–130; Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 148). Hence, the open doors philosophy guided the administration to prescribe globally free trade and assertive multilateralism. In Secretary of State Albright’s (1993-2001) words: ‘we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall, and we see further than other countries into the future’ (US Department of State February 19, 1998).

This universalizing understanding of international relations tilted the administration towards a condescending optimism – which had a problematic reception in regions with a history of anti-imperialist struggle. Such optimism is visible in his following lines:

‘we live in times when the spirit of America—our freedom, our vitality, our strength, our respect for others, our commitment to the future—this is a driving force in the lives of millions and millions of peace-loving people all around the

world. That is why we're trusted to support the people of the Middle East and the people from South Africa to Haiti to Northern Ireland to the former Soviet Union in their courageous efforts to escape the shackles of the past and realize their dreams for tomorrow (...) like people all over the world who are drawing on our strength and our spirit to make their dreams real, we Americans must renew our own faith in the greatness and unlimited potential of our country' (United States 1994).

In the Middle East, the administration's priority was achieving an Israel-Palestine peace solution. In this sense, the president's decisions about the Persian Gulf, which continued to align with the Carter Doctrine, had secondary importance. Indyk (2014) remembers that 'Clinton's immediate challenge was to develop an approach to protect American interests in the Gulf that would bolster his peacemaking priorities in the Arab-Israeli arena.' Authors such as Parsi (2007), Walt and Mearsheimer (2007), and Freedman (2009) stress that, since the 1990s, much of the US's policy has centered on appeasing the pro-Israeli lobby. That poured cold waters over any attempts from the White House to improve Iran relations during his first mandate.

Clinton formulated the Dual Containment strategy for the Persian Gulf, aiming to suppress Iran's and Iraq's regional behaviors – two actors that did not agree with the US's indispensable role. It prescribed that the United States was so dominant that it could exclude Iran and Iraq, the two 'pariah states,' from the securitarian framework until they changed their behaviors or regimes (Yetiv 2008, p. 103; Edwards 2013, p. 114). In National Security Advisor Lake's words: 'we no longer have to fear Soviet efforts to gain a foothold in the Persian Gulf by taking advantage of our support for one of these states to build relations with the other' (Lake 1994). Hence, Internationalism and the optimistic reception of the unipolar moment influenced this strategy. In other words, Clinton was interested in forcing the two local actors to accept the US-inclined order rather than finding ways to integrate them.³⁵

Nevertheless, during his second term, Clinton stated that he did not discard the possibility of dialoguing with Tehran (Seliktar 2012, p. 100). Here is essential to pinpoint that the Oslo negotiations led to two deals (1993 and 1995) between the Israeli and Arab leaders. Hence, Clinton had more political space to reach out to Iran without domestic criticism. From 1997 to 2000, the administration asked Iran for opening gestures while recognizing some past mistakes. Clinton said Iranians had the 'right to be angry at something my country or my culture

³⁵ The containment measures were not equal for both countries. Throughout the period, it is possible to see that the administration was increasingly pro-regime change in Baghdad, while more flexible towards Tehran Freedman 2009, p. 312; Edwards 2013, p. 116.

or other that are generally allied with us today did to you 50 or 60 or 100 or 150 years ago,' stressing that Americans must listen to these grievances (United States 1999). Most impressive was Albright's 2000 speech at Washington's American Iranian Council. She praised Iranian as a 'blossoming democracy,' recognized the US's involvement in the 1953 coup, and compared both countries positively as 'idealistic, proud, family-oriented, spiritually aware and fiercely opposed to foreign domination' nations' (US Department of State 3/17/2000).

However, as the dependent variable shows, their willingness to improve relations was contingent on Iran altering its 'hostile' behavior as an initial move (Freedman 2009, p. 319). They employed a discursive tone reflecting condescendence and patronization, demanding Iran to first change towards what the Americans believed was correct for them to act, showing an olive branch second. Simultaneously, the legislative and the media routinely branded Iran as a 'rogue, terrorist, outlaw or backlash state' (Sick 2009, p. 304). This approach turned out to be a failure, as the dependent variable discussed. Clinton showcased the internationalists' unfitness to deal with countries that do not agree with the US's values and global dominance (Seliktar 2012, p. 100).

The last president was George W. Bush, who had much less international experience than his father. While campaigning, Bush presented himself as a conventional republican with realist tendencies, more skeptical towards international humanitarian missions and multilateralism than Clinton (Dueck 2006, p. 148). In his words, 'if we are an arrogant nation, they will resent us. If we are a humble nation, but strong, they will welcome us' (Simes 2002). Dueck (2006, p. 150) describes Bush as 'more hardline than Clinton, but at the same time more modest in intervening in the international affairs of other countries.' He promised an external policy driven by national interests rather than continuing Clinton's global adventurism (Riedel 2018, p. 131).

Nevertheless, the president had little time to implement his envisioned realist worldview. The World Trade Centre and the Pentagon terrorist attacks in September 2001 forced the administration to adopt a new, assertive strategy. For that, the president embraced neoconservatism, which prescribed a vindictive international behavior. Neoconservatives are associated with names like Irving Kristol and Robert Kagan, who believe the Cold War's end meant a triumph of the US's ideals and the confirmation they need to keep upholding their values worldwide (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, p. 104). They believe the international society

was a constant source of rogue states endangering their primacy and that preemptive force was needed against such threats. For them, Washington should use force as an instrument of global change because diplomacy, deterrence, and containment could not be enough (Hook 2015, p. 16).

The 9/11 attacks worked as a window of opportunity for the neoconservatives to set their political agenda (Dueck 2006, p. 147). Interestingly enough, this missionary and internationalist stand resonated with Bush's evangelical credentials (Monten 2005, p. 144). Assuming that the emergence of terrorist cells within Islamic communities was due to the lack of liberal democracy, the FPE came to terms with endorsing regime-change missions. The administration advocated for military action to promote democratic change in other countries. In Bush's words:

‘on 11th September, 2001, America felt its vulnerability -- even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth. We resolved then, and we are resolved today, to confront every threat, from any source, that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America (...) America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof -- the smoking gun -- that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud’ (White House 2002b).

Therefore, Bush tilted the strategy towards a pessimistic view of the systemic environment and an internationalist-vindicative interpretation of the cognitive function. His discourse gained a moralistic tone: the country was fighting an ‘eternal battle’ against evil (Kinch 2016, p. 100). In his 2002 State of the Union, he outlined the Bush Doctrine, affirming that non-liberal countries possessing weapons of mass destruction were the US's most prominent enemies (Yetiv 2018, p. 267). He proclaimed that they were at war against terror, unleashing the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). He also enlisted Iran and Iraq in his infamous ‘axis of evil’ list of countries threatening world stability. Thus, for the first time since 1980, a president deviated from the Carter Doctrine, incrementing the US's goals. While the Carter Doctrine estimated the use of forces if its regional partners were under clear threat, the Bush one deployed preventive forces to eliminate potential sources of future attacks and change regimes that did not follow the liberal-democratic model.

Finally, it is important to stress that the implementation of neoconservative rhetoric had limitations, such as excluding Saudi Arabia from this discourse. It is plausible to assume that the ‘axis of evil’ narrative deliberately deflected the public attention away from Riyadh towards other Islamist actors (Keynough 2016, p. 154). After all, The United States needed to maintain close relations with the Al Saud monarchy due to the oil market, counter-terrorism operations,

and the massive military procurement. In other words, despite the neoconservative rhetoric, the US-Saudi military partnership was vital to both countries' national interests and remained untouched.

6.4.3.2 Iranian foreign policy executives

So far in the analysis, Iranian FPE has been linked to one man's overwhelming power: first the Shah Pahlavi (1953-1979) and then Ayatollah Khomeini (1979-1989). That changes for this triangle and the next, as Khomeini's death and the consolidation of factionalism opened space for presidential political maneuver. During the period, there were two presidents: pragmatist Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997-2003). They ruled under the aegis of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-), who balanced the political factions (Ehteshami 1995, p. 26). This variable shows how factionalism became a crucial element in understanding Iran's international politics. Despite the ayatollah's dominant power, presidents could tilt decisions partially in their objectives' direction.

While the Supreme Leader worked to guarantee the continuity of the revolutionary principles, both presidents attempted to reintegrate Iran into the international system. The power-play dynamics of the dual leadership allowed both objectives to be pursued simultaneously, even if apparently contradictory (Saikal 2019). This variable shows that Rafsanjani and Khatami, for different reasons, subscribed to a pragmatic interpretation of the regime identity, arguing that national interests and regime survival should not be put at risk in the name of exporting the revolution. Conversely, Khamenei interpreted the identity through ideational lenses and perceived the restrictive environment as beneficial for protecting the Islamic Republic's values and principles.

Khamenei started his political career as Deputy Minister of Defense, becoming the representative of the IRGC on the Revolutionary Council and later elected president in 1981. Nonetheless, in his first years as a *faqih*, Khamenei lacked Khomeini's popularity and charisma. His appointment was not based on cleric seniority, which meant that he had to negotiate his authority with the political factions to assure loyalty (Juneau 2015, p. 94; Saikal 2019, p. 98). As a solution, Khamenei's affiliation was with the conservative political faction, the most influential.

Conservatives believe that Iran should promote Islamism, guarantee independence, and reject foreign interference. Khamenei's biggest concern was cultural infiltration (Sadjadpour

2009, p. 18; Musavian 2014, p. 162). Because his function was to guarantee the revolution's continuity, he was often distressed by the possibility of Western values subverting the Republic's ideals (Arjomand 2009, p. 177). In his words, 'Iran's enemies, more than artillery, guns, and so forth, need to spread cultural values that led to moral corruption' (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 18). There was no bigger enemy than Washington, which Khamenei called a 'hegemonic oppressor.' He was against negotiating with the 'arrogant' power (Musavian 2014, 109,112), assuming that 'the United States has devised a comprehensive plan to subvert the Islamic system' (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 18). Therefore, anyone who decided to deal with them was naïve and unfamiliar with what Washington represented (Seliktar 2012, p. 86).

Conversely, President Rafsanjani interpreted Iran's cognitive function pragmatically, guided by the revolution's independentist principle rather than religious messianism. Before 1979, he was a well-succeeded businessman from a prominent pistachio-exporter family (Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 79). In 1980, he was elected for the first *Majlis*, becoming its speaker. A patriotic, influential entrepreneur, Rafsanjani is one of the pragmatist faction's founders, and he sought to protect Iranian interests while expanding its power (Ehteshami 1995, p. 25). According to Saikal (2019, pp. 99–100), Rafsanjani was a 'charismatic, capable, articulate, and eloquent political cleric.' His goal was to reconstruct the economy, and he believed this was possible by reinserting Iran into the international community (Juneau 2015, p. 94). Thus, the president believed that it was necessary to improve relations to gain access to needed foreign capital and technological expertise (Rakel 2008, p. 158; Amiri et al. 2011, p. 681).

Rafsanjani planned to reduce the confrontationist ideological rhetoric and improve relations with regional countries (Fürtig 2002, p. 109). For the pragmatic faction, a more tolerant theocracy was necessary for economic recuperation (Takeyh 2009, 112, 116). Rafsanjani surrounded himself with technocrat ministries, university professors, and liberal clerics, who had more confidence in the regime's resilience in the face of foreign infiltration than Khamenei (Takeyh 2009, p. 164). They were less skeptical toward improving relations with the West and even with the United States, as long as that happened on a foot of equality and mutual respect (Musavian 2014, p. 108). In the President's words:

'we and they [GCC countries] both have the desire to resolve problems pertaining to bilateral relations. In my opinion, our relations will be normalised in the not too distant future. We did not have expansionist intentions from the beginning, just as our southern

neighbours do not have aggressive designs... We urge our southern neighbours...to cooperate with us in order to resolve existing issues concerning the oil market, maritime laws and Resolution 598 [i.e. relations with Iraq]' (BBC 1988 *apud* Ehteshami 1995, p. 138).

I argue that the empowerment of other political figures after Khomeini's death resulted in the emergence of a phenomenon that has dominated Iranian politics since then: factionalism stuckness. The interplay of divergent factions' interests has often led to contractions, unfulfilled promises, and overall difficulty in implementing change. For example, while Khamenei and Rafsanjani were interested in working together by 1989, disagreements between their factions led to a growing estrangement between both leaders (Pollack 2005, p. 249). Conservatives were against any proximity measure with the United States, whereas pragmatics believed some understanding level was possible and needed (Musavian 2014, p. 120). Rafsanjani advised his diplomats to make the US officials 'comprehend that if they are sincere in improving relations with us, the only way is to show goodwill such as releasing our assets (...) would enable us to begin a process of détente' (Musavian 2014, p. 110). However, with growing factional disagreements, Rafsanjani was forced to renounce these goals (Saikal 2019, p. 102).

These objectives were rekindled with the election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Khatami was the minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in the 1980s, the head of the Iranian national library from 1992 to 1997, and had studied Western philosophy in Hamburg (Pollack 2005, p. 310). In 1997, he campaigned under a political pluralism and reform platform, advocating for a more open Islamic civil society (Ehteshami and Zweiri 2007, pp. 2–6). As a result, he was elected with around 70% of the votes and with high support from intellectuals, the middle class, students, and liberals (Musavian 2014, p. 142).

Concerning international politics, the reformists also employ pragmatic lenses to interpret the regime identity. They did not see a cognitive disfunction in seeking better integration with the international system and the Islamic Republic's ideals. Khatami sought to improve Iran's international relations by calling for a new paradigm, a 'dialogue among civilizations' (Saikal 2019, p. 110). He believed that all nations, despite cultural and ideological differences, should be able to interact positively with each other. He argued that Islam ought to be a tool for seeking such cooperation, as the religion emphasized tolerance (Takeyh 2009, p. 185). To Khatami, this dialogue should:

'understand and utilise religion in a way that it is not incompatible with freedom and progress, rather it sets us on a clear path towards the future. Not only in the world of

Islam, but in the entire global arena, we must condemn self-centeredness, discrimination, avarice, arrogance and violence anywhere and in any form, so we can have a calm and secure world for all' (Salimi 2012, p. 146).

He set three international objectives: normalizing relations with the GCC countries, reconciling with the Europeans and finding an overture to the United States (Takeyh 2009, p. 207). He declared that 'our strategy policy is the expansion of friendship with all regional countries. We believe that existing problems in the region can be solved by wisdom, negotiations, and understanding' and that whenever 'regional countries become closer together, they can prevent foreign intervention in the region, which eventually led to the creation of peace' (Amiri et al. 2011, p. 684). Therefore, Khatami continued Rafsanjani's strategy but with a constructive angle beyond the economy. According to Pollack (2005, p. 310), Khatami said that they were 'in favour of relations with all countries and nation which respect our interests, dignity, and interest,' stressing that 'if we don't have relations with an aggressive and bullying country such as America, it is due to the fact that America does not respect those principles.'

As the dependent variable section discusses, Rafsanjani and Khatami sent signals to the United States for rapprochement. While those signals were reticent in the first administration, they were substantial in the second. For example, in January 1998, Khatami gave an interview to CNN, praising the American people, noting both societies' similarities, comparing US's and Iranian revolutions, and even regretting the suffering provoked by the 1980 hostage crisis (Amanpour 1/7/1998). He also initiated an exchange program of scholars, athletes, and businesspeople to the United States (Ramazani 2008, p. 9).

Notwithstanding, factionalism stuckness made itself visible, as many conservatives opposed Khatami's attempts. Despite the president's popularity, key actors within the government, especially in the *Majlis* and the IRGC, rejected a possible settlement with the United States (Yetiv 2008, p. 99). The debate among the factions was whether the economic and political benefits of having ties with the only superpower would damage the revolution's integrity and anti-imperialist resistance (Freedman 2009). Khamenei, a conservative, openly diverged from the president's intentions towards Washington, making it hard for an actual meaningful resolution. In this context, the opposing factions saw every failed attempt at approximation as proof of Khatami's inefficiency.

Nevertheless, both Khatami and Khamenei perceived the 9/11 attacks in the United States as something that restricted the environment. Therefore, Iran was one of the first countries

to condemn the attacks and send its condolences to Americans. It is possible that Khamenei saw some rapprochement as ‘a necessary evil’ as it became evident that the United States would invade Afghanistan with or without regional assistance (Pollack 2005, p. 347). Another interpretation is that Iranians sent positive signals because they feared that Bush’s new doctrine could come at the cost of Iranian independence (Takeyh 2009, p. 207). The rapprochement did not happen either way, and the Iranian people elected Khatami’s antithesis, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

6.4.3.3 Saudi Arabian foreign policy executives

As discussed in the previous chapter, King Fahd was in charge during the Iranian Revolution and the Siege of Mecca, which pushed him towards a sectarian rhetoric regarding Saudi Arabia’s Islamic role. According to Chubin and Tripp (1996, p. 21), Saddam’s decision to invade Kuwait took the monarchy by surprise, provoking a discussion among the family about how to react. While they agreed Iraq was a direct threat to their security, some princes, including Crown Prince Abdullah, called for an Arab solution via diplomacy and compromise. Others sided with the Sudayri clan, who believed it was mandatory to invite US troops to increase protection (Riedel 2018, p. 104). Being a Sudayri himself, Fahd ended up deciding to ask for US’s assistance ‘with uncharacteristic decisiveness and swiftness’ (Lippman 2004, p. 301).

The monarchy’s strategic preference was to balance Iran against Iraq or vice-versa with the support of the United States. As discussed so far, systemic changes altered Saudi Arabia’s perception of which country represented the biggest threat to the regime's continuity and the order, but not the overall strategy. During the period, Fahd was positively startled by Iranian accommodation signals and showed cautious receptivity to the idea of mending relations (Pollack 2005, p. 267). Iraq, on the other hand, increased its aggressive international stand. Therefore, Saudi Arabian strategy tilted once again in Iran’s direction to balance out Iraq. As a first move, the king received the Iranian Foreign Minister in Riyadh in 1991 for the first time since the revolution, allowing an Iranian delegation to perform the *Hajj*.

However, Abdullah’s ascension as king regent in 1995 boosted Saudi Arabian’s positive attitude towards Iran. He was openly interested in active engagement with the Shia republic to improve the overall regional security (Kechichian 2000, p. 54; Okruhlik 2003). Abdullah was the only son of a Bedouin mother, had no full brothers, and often disagreed with the Sudayris (Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 55). He joined politics as the National Guard commander during

Faisal's reign, showing diplomatic ability in mediating regional crises such as the one between Syria and Jordan (1980) and the Lebanese civil war (1990). Portraited as a 'natural reconciler' (Hiro 2018, p. 148), the Crown Prince was very popular and had close ties with many tribes and Arab prominent figures (Al Toraifi 2012, p. 193; Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 55). He was also a nationalist and pragmatic leader, 'more closely attuned to domestic voices than Fahd' (Okruhlik 2003, p. 114). McLean (2001, p. 36) describes Abdullah as a 'strong nationalist' who emphasized regional relationships and the independent pursuit of national interests.

These characteristics contribute to the understanding of the Iran-Saudi détente. The environment became less restricted after Saddam's defeat, allowing Abdullah to seek a more proactive and constructive regional behavior. A less nationalist leader or more US-leaning may have kept the 'wait and see' policy or subscribed to Clinton's Dual Containment. However, Abdullah reached out to Iran to manage tensions, showing interest in developing a more endogenous regional system through cautious engagement. He also defended Iran's right to have a defense program that included peaceful nuclear capacity, criticizing how Iran was mistreated by the international community (Bahgat 2000, p. 111). Kechichian (2000, p. 58) argues that Abdullah realized that by showing flexibility in dealing with Iran, he could strengthen Saudi Arabia's overall regional appeal, relatively tarnished by the US troop permanence.

I argue that Abdullah employed a pan-Islamist lens for considering Saudi Arabia's identity. Kechichian (2000, p. 48) argues that the Crown Prince wanted to return to his father's assessment of a broader Islamism to guarantee a more influential position among spiritual and political communities. For that, Abdullah called for an 'interfaith dialogue,' an initiative to reduce the sectarian tone among clerics and the royalty. According to Cordesman (2002, p. 43), Abdullah said that 'we have to eliminate the obstacles which block the way [towards amity] and giving counsel on a reciprocal basis between Muslim countries.' Pan-Islamic rhetoric could repair Saudi Arabia's image among Arab and Islamic nations. By reaching out to Iran, Abdullah could show his country's willingness to cooperate, reducing anti-Shia sentiments, pushing Riyadh away from radical Islamism, and displaying more independence. In short, in his view, if regional collaboration could be done via pan-Islamism, inter-faith dialogue, and religious solidarity, Saudi Arabia could guarantee for itself a more prominent role.

His proactive attitude alarmed some US officials (Kechichian 2000, p. 58; Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 56). While he valued the strategic partnership with Washington, he did not

hesitate to be critical of the US's regional policy, especially concerning Israel (McLean 2001, p. 36).³⁶ In his words, 'a time comes when people and nations part. We are at a crossroads. It is time for the United States and Saudi Arabia to look to their separate interests' (Weiss 2015). Thus, he was perceived as 'less friendly' (Wynbrandt 2004, p. 270) or 'not so intimately tied to the United States' (Okruhlik 2003, p. 114). Nevertheless, Abdullah was a realist and did not allow the relations to get tarnished. During the Clinton years, Washington and Riyadh cooperated on a wide range of issues, from peace diplomacy to counterterrorism (Riedel 2018, p. 129). The autonomy rhetoric was more for regional and domestic audiences, not for Western partners. Guaranteeing ties with Washington continued to be crucial for the monarchy, despite Abdullah's goals to co-found a more endogenous regional system.

The 9/11 attacks made the environment restrictive once again, driving Abdullah to reassess his priorities not to endanger the relations with the United States. Despite the initial refusal to assume responsibility for the events, Abdullah condemned the attack and oriented King Fahd to send condolences. In April 2002, the Crown Prince traveled to Texas to meet the president and discuss anti-terrorism measures. Hiro (2018, 193-184) calls attention to how the close friendship between the Bush family and Prince Bandar, ambassador in Washington since 1983, was crucial to repairing the relations after the attacks. In a nutshell, Abdullah realized that intelligence and security cooperation with the United States was a bigger priority to guarantee the national interest than reforming the regional system's architecture.

6.5 The dependent variable

The systemic change created conditions for the previous triangle to change from a 'stable marriage' to a 'ménage à trois,' as the three actors shared a threat perception concerning Iraq. Balance of power could have led to a triangle like the first one (1969-1979), where the three countries had positive relations. However, the intervening variables explain how the triangle evolved into a 'romantic triangle,' in which one actor, Saudi Arabia, shared positive relations with the other two, whereas the US-Iran relations continued negative. They also show how Tehran and Washington were interested in improving relations but failed due to domestic constraints. I argue that the US' hyper-sensibility to actors rejecting its 'indispensable nation'

³⁶ For example, after George H. Bush's election, Abdullah tried to pressure for bigger action on Palestine, even refusing an invitation to the White House until 'something was done' Riedel 2018, p. 132.

role and Iranian factionalism harmed the attempts to appease relations. Eventually, the Iran-Saudi détente was undermined due to the continuity of the US-Iran enmity.

This triangle has two tendencies: the Iran-Saudi détente and the US-Iran failure to reach out to one another. The intervening variables revealed that the systemic change altered neither the three actors' status ambitions nor their regime identity. Throughout the period, Iran was a revisionist actor while Saudi Arabia and the United States were status quo. Moreover, the US's lack of a clear enemy made it oversensible to any country that challenged its 'indispensable nation' position. That hampered the possibilities for a concrete improvement between Iran and the United States. In contrast, a shared perception of environmental openness allowed Iran and Saudi Arabia to assume pragmatic stands regarding regional matters, bringing them closer.

Since 1979, Iranian and Saudi Arabian identities have fueled incongruity between the two regional actors. The first presented itself as a revolutionary, Shia, anti-western republic, and the second, a conservative, Sunni, and monarchical system. They also aspired to the position of Islamic leadership, which drove them to compete. However, a rapprochement opportunity emerged because both improved their power positions, shared the Iraqi threat and suffered from the oil market crisis. Thus, I claim that pragmatic leaderships in Tehran (Rafsanjani and Khatami) and Riyadh (Abdullah) managed to profit from this window and ignite the détente.

President Rafsanjani aimed to reconstruct Iran's economy by international rehabilitation, primarily via better relations with neighboring countries. Similarly, Crown Prince Abdullah reduced foreign policy's sectarian tone to engage with other regional actors constructively. In December 1990, Rafsanjani met Crown Prince Abdullah on the sidelines of the OIC summit in Senegal to discuss the *Hajj* as a first step to improving ties (Al Toraifi 2012, pp. 161–162). In March 1991, Foreign Minister Velayati and his counterpart Prince Saud al-Faisal restored diplomatic ties, and thousands of Iranians were allowed to join the *Hajj* (Amiri et al. 2011, p. 682). Besides, Velayati and Fahd proposed a joint economic commission in 1992 (Keynough 2016, p. 132).

Considering that both countries were in financial distress, they normalized economic relations by lifting trade restrictions (Al Toraifi 2012, p. 220). Most importantly, they decided to work together in OPEC to tackle declining oil prices, cooperating on quotas, policies, and production levels (Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 102). In 1991, Rafsanjani suggested that Fahd cut production to increase prices, something he did in May 1992 (Keynough 2016, p. 131). In

2000, they signed a memorandum of understanding to promote trade, investment, and navigation (Keynoush 2016, p. 149). Thus, their partnership was crucial for stabilizing the oil market on the eve of the 2000s (Takeyh 2009, p. 199).

President Khatami's election coincided with Abdullah's confirmation as the de-facto leader, transforming the normalization efforts into active cooperation. Abdullah's regional aspirations enabled cooperation conditions (Okruhlik 2003, p. 114; Kechichian 2000, p. 48). Equally, Khatami's reformism tilted the dialogue with words such as cooperation, dialogue, coexistence, and reform (Keynoush 2016, p. 148). Moreover, his 'dialogue for civilizations' coincided with Abdullah's 'interfaith dialogue.' Thus, in 1997, Abdullah visited Tehran for the OIC summit and embraced Khatami for photos. According to Al Toraifi (2012, p. 186), Abdullah came out of the meeting with 'a strong impression' about the Iranian desire for dialogue. In 1998, minister Al-Faisal visited Iran and signed a wide-ranging deal covering finance, culture, trade, science, sports, and technology (Okruhlik 2003, p. 118). In 1999, Khatami visited Riyadh to discuss how to find a more sensitive and fruitful understanding of the regional order (Takeyh 2009, p. 199).

By the eve of the 2000s, Iran and Saudi Arabia indicated an interest in advancing their cooperation beyond economic issues. They agreed on the need to discuss a more endogenous security apparatus for the Persian Gulf (Keynoush 2016, p. 139). In 2001, they signed a security agreement focusing on drug trafficking, terrorism, immigration, and border control (Al Toraifi 2012, p. 216; Keynoush 2016, p. 150). Both leaders mentioned their commitment to finding common ground on regional events and showed a willingness to discuss a defense pact in the future (Okruhlik 2003, p. 122).

I argue that a significant limitation to the continuity of the Saudi-Iranian *détente* was the US-Iranian hostility. Washington was Riyadh's leading security partner, whereas Tehran opposed the US's regional role as part of an imperialist agenda. Both Iran and the United States have exceptionalist identities that oppose one another. Their exceptionalist projects promote the two countries as inherent foes: the United States sees itself as the indispensable nation and Iran as the ultimate revisionist actor. That makes any attempt to change relations a complicated and delicate movement. The following paragraphs discuss how the three US administrations and both Iranian presidents attempted, one way or another, to appease the relations, but they did it without considering domestic constraints, leading to failures.

First, George H. W. Bush focused on curbing Iran's ability to damage the US's interests in the region rather than changing its behavior. His administration appreciated Iran's neutrality in 1990 and welcomed the idea of reducing animosity. However, his 'goodwill begets goodwill' approach failed to resonate in Iran at the velocity he hoped. After Khomeini's death, Iran's politics became factionalized, and Khamenei was still consolidating his power. While the pragmatic faction argued to improve ties with Washington and reduce Iranian isolation, conservatives feared Western cultural infiltration. Therefore, any attempt towards normalization demanded delicate diplomacy on an equal foot approach, elements the US's FPE did not prioritize during the unipolar moment. By the time Rafsanjani managed to assist the hostage situation, George H. W. Bush had snubbed the gesture due to its delay (Pollack 2005, p. 248). Right afterward, in 1992, the US Congress signed the 1992 Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act suspending the transfer of technologies (Edwards 2013, p. 129).

In his turn, Clinton was an internationalist, more inclined toward measures that excluded pariah states that did not conform to the liberal norm or forced them to adapt to the US's model. Under this mentality, he established the Dual Containment strategy, which barred Iran and Iraq from the regional security arrangement. Considering that Saddam became the most prominent threat, a realist approach would expect Washington to apply the 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' tactic and turn to Iran for appeasement, as it did in the 1980s with Iraq against Iran. However, for those subscribing to the idea that Washington should promote liberalism worldwide, non-conformist countries like Iran needed to be contained.

Moreover, Clinton was more susceptible to Congress' pressure and passed two executive orders in 1995 to forbid trade with Iran.³⁷ In this context, Rafsanjani made the political gamble of offering an oil production contract to Conoco, an American company. However, Washington forbade Conoco to sign the deal as it was inconsistent with the Dual Containment (Freedman 2009, p. 302). Hence, Rafsanjani lamented: 'we chose to show our commitment to rapprochement by allowing a major energy deal to proceed. We had hoped that this would lead to the beginning of wide-ranging cooperation with the US on a political level' (Musavian 2014, p. 122). In the sequence, Clinton signed the 1996 Iran Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which imposed sanctions on foreign companies that invested more than US\$ 20 million in Iran.

³⁷ Executive Orders numbers 12957 (March 1995) and 12959 (April 1995).

In June 1996, a terrorist attack bombed the Khobar Towers near Dhahran, killing nineteen US air force personnel. The US government and the CIA had a case pointing to Iran but had no evidence to go to court (Pollack 2005, p. 254). Concomitantly, the Saudis arrested suspects but refrained from handing over the results of their investigations to Washington (Alsultan and Saeid 2016, p. 99). Here it is possible to assume that Abdullah's regional cooperation preferences influenced the decision. Some authors argue that the monarchy was divided on whether or not to give the information at the risk of damaging the détente with Iran (Pollack 2005, p. 282; Al Toraifi 2012, p. 202; Keynoush 2016, p. 140). Ultimately, and against the US's wishes, Riyadh did not release any statement condemning Iran, a signal of its desire to protect ties with Tehran (Keynoush 2016, p. 140).

A new moment for US-Iranian appeasement began with Khatami's election, which coincided with Clinton's second term. The United States was optimistic about Iran's reformist movement, sending diplomatic letters and proposing direct talks (Edwards 2013, p. 139). Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated that 'we began to adjust the lens through which we viewed Iran' and that the administration welcomed Khatami's 'call for a dialogue between our people' (US Department of State 3/17/2000). Accordingly, in 1997, they relaxed visas for Iranians; in 1998, they provided ILSA waivers to foreign companies and enlisted the Iranian foreign opposition MEK (*Mojahedin-e Khalq*) as a terrorist organization; and in 1999, they repealed some sanctions over food, medicine, and other humanitarian goods (Pollack 2005, p. 322; Freedman 2009, p. 306).

From 1997 to 2000, Albright and Clinton sent signals to Iran to improve ties. However, Iranian factionalism made it impossible for Khatami to respond and move toward concrete conciliation policies. Despite also sending positive signals, he was engaged in an internal political struggle to convince the Supreme Leader about reconciliation (Takeyh 2009, p. 202). Some authors argue that conservatives discarded Albright's 2000 call for this particular sentence: 'despite the trend towards democracy, control over the military, judiciary courts and police remains in unelected hands' (Freedman 2009, p. 307; Musavian 2014, p. 159; Hiro 2018, p. 161). For Iranians, Clinton's attempts were not reaching them as peers but as subalterns, still accusing Iran of being undemocratic and a terrorist supporter. As Khamenei was still consolidating his leadership, reaching Americans out could damage his position among the

conservatives and symbolize a win for the reformist faction. Thus, he shut down any response to Clinton's administration.

The third window of opportunity for improving relations came after the 9/11 attacks. The attacks resulted in environmental restrictiveness for Saudi Arabia and Iran, forcing them to reassess their options as the threat of US military intervention became imminent. I argue that the Afghanistan War was an ideal opportunity for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to work together and find a more sustainable dynamic. Indeed, Iran did not oppose the war against Afghanistan and promptly engaged in the negotiations with the Taliban (Pollack 2005, p. 346). Iran joined Operation Enduring Freedom by offering assistance in planning and intelligence, persecuting al-Qaeda and Taliban members, and cooperating with the Northern Alliance (Musavian 2014, p. 168). In their turn, the Saudis supported Iran's participation in all peace initiatives (Keynoush 2016, p. 146). They also granted the Americans entry to their command facilities and provided humanitarian and financial aid (Keynoush 2016, p. 153).

In November 2001, the United Nations held a conference in Bonn to discuss the issue, and Iran and the United States collaborated positively (Pollack 2005, p. 347; Keynoush 2016, p. 154). Until 2002, American and Iranian officials participated in the Geneva talks, displaying mutual interest. According to Takeyh (2009, p. 129), Khatami believed Afghanistan provided the two countries a remarkable opportunity to improve relations. Similarly, Seliktar (2012, p. 128) states that Americans, including Colin Powell, were very interested in opening new possibilities. That is why Bush's 'axis of evil' speech was utterly out of place, as it accused Iran of being a supporter of global terrorism. Musavian (2014, p. 169) says that reformists in Iran felt betrayed for being on that list and that Khatami confessed that he was 'confident that Bush put the final nail in the coffin of Iran-US relations (...) any improvements in relations must be ruled out, at least during my presidency'. For the conservatives, that confirmed Americans could not be trusted.

Via the intervening variables, it becomes clear that the United States missed the opportunity to take advantage of the Saudi-Iran détente. The détente demonstrated that pragmatic figures could soothe ideological and identitarian disputes to improve regional security despite divergent systems. Ironically, a willingness to improve ties was also present within US's and Iranian FPEs. However, considering the deep-ingrained US-Iran mistrust, what was probably missing was an interested third party that could translate their intentions. Fürtig (2002,

p. 117) argues that ‘for various reasons, Saudi was the perfect choice’ for the mediator. Riyadh had already proposed negotiating with Iran and other disputed parties, as the second triangle demonstrated. Pollack (2005, p. 320) says that, in the 1990s, the Saudis told Vice President Al Gore they were ‘delighted both in the change in Washington’s approach to Iran and its willingness to have them serve as go-betweens.’ In Abdullah’s words:

‘I do not think it would be difficult for the brotherly Iranian people and its leadership and for a big power like the United States to reach a solution to any disagreement between them . . . There is nothing that will make us more happy than to see this sensitive part of the world enjoy stability, security and prosperity . . . If the United States asks us we will not hesitate to contribute to efforts to bring stability to the region’ (Cordesman 2003, p. 46).

It is possible to say that this missed opportunity is related to the US’s massive power in the region and the excessive confidence in its indispensable role. That allowed them to produce a strategy that excluded crucial actors, ignored the growing anti-Americanism, and responded to Iranians overtures with a condescending tone. That combined with the fact that the political scenario post-Khomeini was still in its consolidation period. Therefore, any rapprochement towards Washington needed to be cautiously balanced among the Iranian factions.

Lastly, by intensifying its narrative against Iran, the United States jeopardized the Iran-Saudi détente. Saudi Arabia continued dependent on the US’s security provision. As the weakest link within the triangle, Riyadh could not hold for much longer being the pivot actor (the only one with two positive relations) if tensions increased between the other two. Ultimately, the Saudi-Iran detente’s perpetuation would demand an improvement between Tehran and Washington too. With the restrictive environment after 2001, Saudi Arabia began to appease the United States, announcing a crackdown against terrorism and capital evasion and a unit to monitor charities – hence, the détente became a second-tier priority (Lippman 2004, p. 338; Niblock 2006, p. 129). Finally, the US’s decision to invade Iraq, which sidelined Riyadh and Tehran, altered the regional balance of power and the dynamics of the triangle completely.

6.6 Conclusions

This chapter concluded that the period from 1990 to 2003 was one of the lost opportunities, as the regional power distribution indicated space for improving ties within the triangle. For the first time since 1979, the three actors shared the perception that Iraq was the leading regional threat. Moreover, economic hardship motivated Iran and Saudi Arabia to find collaborative solutions within OPEC. However, that alone does not explain why the two local

actors orchestrated a moment of rapprochement nor shed light on how the détente developed. Additionally, the triangle is marked by a series of failed attempts at reconciliation between Iran and the United States – from both sides. That can only be diagnosed via the evaluation of the intervening variables.

Iran's assessment of threats and environmental restrictiveness got more complex after the Gulf War. On the one hand, the permanence of troops meant that the United States became an extra-regional power with capabilities that overweighted local actors. On the other hand, the Iraqi isolation was a vindication for Iran, boosting its changeable power. As the identity variable showed, the Iran-Iraq war created a new cognitive layer for Iran, which allowed the recalculation of international priorities based on the pragmatic assessment of environment restrictiveness. Under the pragmatic lens, the export of the revolution rhetoric is reduced, which favors Iran's changeable power. That is an NCR understanding of policymaking: ideational motivations are possible when environment openness and the regime are secured. Thus, Rafsanjani's and Khatami's turn towards pragmatism was vital for enabling the détente period.

However, it is also key to look into Saudi Arabia's FPE to understand the détente, something many analyses tend to sideline. The end of the Cold War could imply reducing Saudi Arabia's strategic value to the West. However, by responding to King Fahd's call and sending troops to the country, Washington reaffirmed the continuity of the Carter Doctrine in a post-Cold War world and reduced Saudi Arabian anxiety. Nevertheless, Abdullah wanted to improve his country's position, harmed by the opinion that the GCC could not protect themselves alone. He aspired for a more endogenous regional order based on tactic collaboration with Iran and pan-Islamism. Perceiving Iraq's isolation and Iran's improved image as an opportunity window, he reached out to Tehran to manage tensions. Hence, the intervening variables exposed how interconnected environment perception, cognitive lens, and political ambitions are.

They also revealed how domestic politics play a crucial role in grand strategizing. The unipolarity provoked ontological distress for the US's policymakers, as they traditionally relied on the existence of a rival or enemy to oppose their values. That made them hypersensitive to threat perception while transforming their status community into the whole world. In this context, the Dual Containment strategy must be understood: unipolarity was seen as permissive while internationalism authorized the indispensable nation to impose its preferred order. When

Clinton eventually attempted to approach Iran, it did under the rhetoric that Iran needed to change first, which Khamenei immediately rejected.

This is the first triangle in which domestic political disputes play a role in Iranian grand strategizing. Factionalism stuckness showed how the dual system creates an atmosphere that is challenging to implement change. Anti-Americanism discourse is ingrained in the Iranian identity, which tends to drive much of the conservatives' suspicion towards the West. Moreover, issues related to Khamenei's consolidation of power and growing disagreements between presidents and the leader obstructed the attempts to improve ties with Washington. Nevertheless, the US's lack of knowledge about Iran's political ethos cannot be taken out of the equation, as George H.W. Bush and, particularly, Clinton did not approach Tehran on an equal footing, hurting, from the start, Rafsanjani's and Khatami's abilities to convince other factions.

The dependent variable pinpointed the continuity of US-Iran enmity as an element weakening the Saudi-Iranian détente. The 9/11 attacks and the US's neoconservatism restricted the environment for both Tehran and Riyadh. With the imminent threat of intervention, the space for endogenous regional cooperation reduced for the Saudi FPE, which needed to improve its own tarnished relations with Washington. Thus, Saudi Arabia also indicates an NCR understanding of decision-making, as the restrictive environment pushed them to prioritize survival. Conversely, restrictiveness pushed even more pragmatism in Iran, with Khatami and Khamenei interested in contacting Washington. Nevertheless, neoconservatives blinded Bush to these signals who eventually dissolved this opportunity moment.

In sum, the FPE in this chapter revealed that pragmatic leadership can drive the relations within the triangle in the direction of a more collaborative scenario if the systemic context allows it. Whereas the FPE and status satisfaction variables explain the motivations for Iranian and Saudi pragmatism, regime identity clarifies why advances can only occur via a process of trust-building. That is not to say that the Saudi-Iranian trust-building process was extraordinarily successful. However, they were managing to reduce the suspicions engendered within their identities in favor of mutual goals. However, the continuity of the détente under a restrictive scenario demanded an improvement in the US-Iranian ties, which continued to be permeated by miscommunication. By 2003, the opportunities visible at the beginning of the period faded. Ultimately, the consequences of the Iraq invasion returned the triangle to a similar scenario of the 1980s: an interventionist United States, an anxious Saudi Arabia, and a non-conformist Iran.

7. Fourth triangle: the *Stable Marriage Revised* (2003-2014)

This chapter first introduces the systemic change, which was the US's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 under the clout of the war on terror. Second, it explores the three actors' contextualized power (stable and changeable) from 2003 to 2014. Third, a brief section discusses the Persian Gulf balance of power. In the sequence, the three intervening variables (status satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives) are explored. The final section presents the triangular relationship, which slowly evolved into a new 'stable romantic triangle,' with two negative relations (Iran and Saudi Arabia; Iran and the United States) and one positive (Saudi Arabia and the United States). The tendencies are the gradual transformation of Saudi Arabia's ambitions toward regional leadership and the United States taking the lead in the Iranian nuclear negotiations. Finally, the chapter offers conclusions.

7.1 The 2003 US invasion of Iraq

The US's retaliation for the 9/11 attacks was the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 as preventive actions against potential national threats. After the 2001 military victory in Afghanistan, the administration turned to Iraq as the next step to implement Bush's 'Forward Strategy of Freedom,' which would bring, in his view, 'the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade' to non-liberal democracies (Dodge 2013, p. 243). For the United States, Saddam Hussein was one of the 'most vicious world leaders' and 'had to go' (Flibbert 2006, p. 316). Thus, the invasion was justified as the United States believed Iraq possessed world mass destruction armaments (WMD) and could provide them to groups plotting new terrorist strikes against Americans or its allies.

The war had bipartisan congressional approval and domestic support, despite the lack of substantial evidence that Iraq had chemical or biological weapons. The United States assumed that it was possible to construct a liberal democracy in Iraq, consolidate free-market capitalism, and secure oil markets (Abootalebi 2018, p. 275). However, they received little support from allies, and the Arab League was against any intervention (Hiro 2018, p. 188). Nevertheless, Operation Iraqi Freedom, a 'shock and awe' mission, was launched on March 19th, 2003.³⁸ On May 1st, Bush declared mission accomplished, dissolving the Iraqi army and proceeding to

³⁸ 'CENTCOM mounted 37,000 air sorties, launched 23,000 precision-guided missiles, fired 750 cruise missiles, and dropped 1,566 cluster bombs'; many Iraqi military men were defected, and there was no formal surrender Hiro 2018, p. 190.

political transition. On December 13th, Saddam Hussein was captured and later executed for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.

Conflict in Iraq intensified with a widespread insurgency against foreign occupation and growing sectarian tension. In June 2004, the United States handed political control to the Iraqi interim government. However, by then, the political field was dominated by sectarian disputes (Halabi 2009, p. 125; Dodge 2018, p. 25). During the political reconfiguration's first steps and amidst growing terrorist attacks, the Shias' political dominance triggered a Sunni boycott of the electoral process (Abootalebi 2018, p. 279; Hiro 2018, pp. 193–197). Clearly, there was a lack of post-war planning and inept communication with local leadership. Abootalebi (2018, p. 274) points to the US's hubris and inadequate knowledge about Iraqi society as causes for errors. Besides, neoconservatives were blinded to the contradiction of advocating secular democracy while isolating Islamic factions and perpetuating occupation (Flibbert 2006, p. 345; Halabi 2009, p. 117).

In February 2006, a Shia shrine was bombed in Samarra, escalating Shia and Sunni tensions into total civil war (Ghattas 2020, pp. 233–236). Shia groups such as Mahdi Army and Badr Brigade started a violent offensive against the Sunnis with Iranian backing. The election of Shia Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister in the same year resulted in further political alienation of the Sunnis (Hiro 2018, p. 214). The chaos empowered Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who broke off from al-Qaeda to form his Iraqi branch (*Jamaat al Tawhid wal Jihad*). After his assassination in 2006, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi renamed the branch the Islamic State of Iraq (Hiro 2018, p. 196; Abootalebi 2018, p. 279). The level of sectarian violence kept increasing, and, in January 2007, the United States dispatched over 21,500 soldiers in a new military surge (Hiro 2018, p. 215). Nevertheless, in 2009, President Barack Obama returned the Green Zone to the Iraqi government, declaring their combat mission would end.³⁹

The invasion and post-conflict mission, both poorly planned, together with the increasingly violent sectarianism, frustrated the Iraqi political transition (Halabi 2009, p. 118; Abootalebi 2018, p. 276). That also enabled external interference, particularly from Iran, which provided support to the Shia-led government and supplied to militias (Pollack 2005, p. 354; Hiro 2018, p. 193). The conflict gained an even more daunting tone after the Islamic State of Iraq

³⁹ The Green Zone, or the International Zone of Baghdad refers to a central part of the capital that hosted the Coalition Provision Authority during the occupation.

and Syria (ISIS) foundation in 2013. By June 2014, ISIS declared a new caliphate, seizing the Iraqi second-biggest city, Mosul. That drove Iran and the United States to deploy forces against the group. Thus, 2014 delimits this analytical period as the caliphate's declaration virtually eliminated the borders between Iraq and Syria and marked another structural change.

7.2 Independent variable: power in context

7.2.1 The US's power

7.2.1.1 Stable power

If the 1990s represented a reassuring decade for the US's primacy as a global power, the 9/11 attacks were 'a brutal epiphany,' doubting the country's sense of continental protection it once had (Flibbert 2006, p. 345). While the US territory did not change, the attacks exposed a need to reinforce defense capabilities, expanding the military budget from 3,1% of the GDP in 2001 to 4% in 2004, peaking at 4,9% in 2010, and closing the period at 3.6% in 2014 (World Bank n.d.m). The military spending went from US\$ 440,5 billion in 2003 to US\$ 752,2 billion in 2011 (World Bank n.d.p). While that budget started to decline after 2011, closing at US\$ 647,7 billion in 2014, it kept astonishingly high in comparison with other powerful countries (World Bank n.d.p). Moreover, the administration also created the Department of Homeland Security, unified intelligence community agencies, and relocated responsibilities between foreign intelligence and security institutions (Kitchen 2016).

In a nutshell, the United States is the most powerful military actor globally, the only one that divides 'the world into regional military commands' (Hook 2015, p. 24). It has an edge in terms of weapons systems (with a substantial capability to project power via sea, land, and air) and a dominant position concerning military alliances. In the Persian Gulf, Iraq's invasion and subsequent occupation resulted in a massive deployment of forces. At the beginning of the conflict, Washington transferred CENTCOM from the Saudi Arabian to the Qatari Al' Udeid airbase to expand it. Military engineers upgraded the Qatari base, ports, and runway facilities to support warships and transport aircraft (Lawson 2011, p. 65). They also boosted cooperation with the United Arab Emirates via the Al Dhafra airbase, one of the region's most critical facilities and strategic bases (Zenko 2018, p. 16). Equally important is the maintenance of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, responsible for patrolling the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

The US's power projection in the region became more comprehensive after 2003. While it eventually pulled out forces from Iraq in 2011, Washington kept around 800 intelligence staff

and officers, 16 thousand diplomats and security officers, and signed about 400 military cooperation agreements with Baghdad (Sun and Zoubir 2012, pp. 92–93). In 2013, it had military personnel based in Qatar (627), Bahrain (1100), Saudi Arabia (500), Kuwait (1164), UAE (5856), Oman (22), and Turkey (1867) (Sun and Zoubir 2015, p. 96). According to Zenko (2018, p. 10), the US's presence in the Middle East allows them to: engage military-to-military to influence political, social, and security outcomes; facilitate weapons sales, security cooperation, and training; showcase force during peacetime; organize stability operations; start offshore missiles attacks, and orchestrate full-scale combat operations. Thus, they were able to project military power as no other regional actor.

However, the troops' permanence and the chaotic aftermath in Iraq created war fatigue among Americans (Cordesman et al. 2014). It is estimated that the war cost around US\$ 1,7 trillion, plus US\$ 490 billion in benefits and US\$ 212 billion in reconstruction efforts (Abootalebi 2018, p. 279). In the United States, there was a visible domestic dissatisfaction with the interminable operations and the high military spending, which were contrasted with poor economic numbers by 2008. Compared with the previous period, the first decade of the 2000s had much inferior economic performance (Palley 2008, p. 2). In 2003, the GDP growth rate was 2,8%, in contrast with 4,1% in 2000. These numbers kept plumbing, reaching -2,5% in 2009, closing at 2,5% in 2014 (World Bank n.d.j).

The 2008 economic crisis resulted from an economic expansion based on a housing price bubble and consumer borrowing (Palley 2008, p. 3). After the banking sector's collapse, unemployment boomed, investment declined, several businesses bankrupted, and consumption plunged (Ashbee and Waddan 2010; Tooze 2018, p. 66). As a result, the GDP dropped for the first time ever from US\$ 14,7 trillion in 2008 to US\$ 14,4 trillion in 2009 – causing a recession (World Bank n.d.g). The economic collapse had a global impact, with more than 104 countries experiencing adverse effects (Tooze 2018, p. 67). However, already by 2010, growth returned, with the GDP closing the period at US\$ 16,7 trillion (World Bank n.d.g), whereas national debt skyrocketed (Barnes and Jaffe 2006, p. 144).

Moreover, by the eve of the 2010s, it was clear that emerging countries challenged the unipolar moment narrative. According to Layne (2018, p. 97), it is possible to discuss the US's relative decline, especially as the economic hegemon became the world's largest debtor and not the largest creditor. Notwithstanding, throughout the period, the United States continued to be

the world's most significant global economy and a military powerhouse, despite China's visible catching up in economic terms (Brands 2016, p. 361).⁴⁰ Finally, essential to this thesis, no country could project military power in the Middle East as quickly as the United States, making its position still very privileged (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018).

7.2.1.2 Changeable power

The operation in Iraq was a unilateral move criticized by many US's close allies (Oren 2007, p. 587). While the operation was a showcase of military power, it did not hold as much prestige. No Arab state contributed with troops, although Saudi Arabia allowed the use of its airbases, and Kuwait provided free fuel (Sun and Zoubir 2015, p. 82). Nevertheless, security ties with Qatar, Kuwait, and the Emirates continued positive and focused on security cooperation (Sun and Zoubir 2015, p. 82). Since 2004 and particularly after 2011, Washington increased its arms agreements and trade deals with all the GCC countries (Cordesman et al. 2014; Niblock 2015, p. 9). Also, it instituted for the first time diplomatic and security links with Iraq. During the period, the only Persian Gulf country that did not have a US embassy was Iran.

However, the war tainted the country's image in the region, aggravating anti-Americanism. For many, the project to spread democracy was just a cloak for neo-imperialism and a desire to control the oil reserves (Halabi 2009, p. 127; Akbarzadeh 2011, p. 2). Moreover, supporting democracy while endorsing undemocratic leaders made Washington appear hypocritical to many Middle Easterners (Pressman 2009, p. 151). The fact that no WMD was found in Iraq only boosted the feelings against the superpower. A 2006-2007 public pooling in the Middle East found that 79% agreed that Washington aimed to weaken and divide the Islamic world (Kull April 2007). Another survey from 2008 showed that 83% had negative views about the US's role in the region (Telhami 2008).⁴¹ Obviously, Islamist radical groups tapped into these sentiments to recruit members (Barnes and Jaffe 2006, p. 144; Halabi 2009, p. 127).

Finally, how the United States reacted to the protests that overtook the Middle East on the eve of 2011, the Arab Uprisings, affected their likeness among traditional regional

⁴⁰ It is interesting to notice here, in terms of numbers, how the gap reduced between the United States and China throughout the period: based on the World Bank database, the US GDP was US\$ 11,4 trillion in 2003, while the Chinese was US\$ 1,6 trillion; in 2014, the US GDP was US\$ 17,5 trillion, while the Chinese US\$ 10,4 trillion.

⁴¹ The 2006-2007 pool was applied in Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Indonesia; the 2008 survey sampled 4000 people from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.

partners.⁴² To most GCC countries, particularly the Saudis and Emiratis, Washington did nothing to protect partners like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or Ben Ali in Tunisia (Al-Sudairi 2015, p. 108). Traditional partners, worried about the continuity of instability, also disliked the US's non-interference in Syria and the trouble handling the Iraqi civil war (Al-Rasheed 2018a, p. 237). Thus, while ties with the GCC continued strong, especially in intelligence sharing, training, and security cooperation, there was a crisis of confidence in the US's role by the end of the period (Al-Sudairi 2015, p. 108; Gause 2018, p. 41). Thus, this uncertainty can be linked to the GCC's attempts at security diversification during the 2010s. If successful, these attempts can reduce the US's changeable power in the long term by bringing other extra-regional competitors.

7.2.2 Iranian power

7.2.2.1 Stable power

Reduced threats and higher oil prices in the first half of the 2000s empowered Iran. First, Saddam's replacement by a Shia government meant Iran no longer shared 1,599 km of borders with a long-standing enemy, gaining direct access to associates in Syria and Lebanon. Thus, when it comes to geography, the 2003 events improved Iran's stable power. Second, demographically, the population kept under a constant average of 1,2% growth, a relatively low number, but still amounting to one of the Middle East's largest populations – 77,47 million in 2014 (World Bank n.d.t). Moreover, with oil prices rising in 2004, reaching US\$ 99,6 a barrel in 2008, Iran's economy grew accordingly.⁴³ Thus, the GDP increased from US\$ 153,5 billion in 2003 to US\$ 598,9 billion in 2012, dropping in 2014 to US\$ 432,6 billion (World Bank n.d.e).

The GDP growth was 8,7% in 2003, however, it plummeted to -7,4% in 2012 and closed 4,6% in 2014. On the one hand, the population saw lower interest rates, new loans, and improved subsidies during Ahmadinejad's presidency (Arjomand 2009, p. 116; Krane 2019, p. 100). On the other hand, these policies were riddled with mismanagement, inefficiency, and corruption,

⁴² The Arab Uprisings were a series of bottom-up, popular movements that started in Tunisia and spread across the Arab World, representing a general dissatisfaction with socio-economic conditions, inflation, unemployment, and corruption. While each had its own particularities, these events took advantage of globalization and social media to express their discontent across borders. Virtually all Arab countries had some type of its own 'Arab Spring.' The consequences of the protests were diffuse but rather insufficient in terms of democracy improvement. The long-standing governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were overthrown, while civil conflicts were unraveled in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain.

⁴³ Oil prices from Macrotrends database (see: <https://www.macrotrends.net/>).

shoving away private and foreign investment (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2007, p. 409; Arjomand 2009, p. 161; Saikal 2019, p. 119). Most importantly, the country started to suffer deeply with international sanctions during this period. Consequently, Iran had a volatile economic growth during the period, with productivity below its potential and difficulty capturing investments. Moreover, despite the spike in capital income, the oil reserves kept underexplored, requiring investment and upgrading (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2007, p. 410; Juneau 2015, p. 67). In comparison, while Iran produced 4 Mb/day in 2004, Saudi Arabia produced 10,7 Mb/day.⁴⁴

In 2003, Iran announced its plans to develop a complete nuclear fuel cycle as a path to reduce oil dependency. In the same year, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) declared that Iran failed to comply with the Non-Proliferation Treaty norms (Ward 2009, p. 320). The first round of UNSC sanctions came in July 2006, demanding Iran to suspend all enrichment-related processes. In February 2010, Iran announced it could enrich uranium to 20% purity, provoking heavier UNSC rounds of sanctions (Hiro 2018, p. 231). From 2010 on, unilateral and multilateral sanctions had tighter and tighter financial curbs, restricting investment possibilities for international companies and banks (Hiro 2018, p. 231; Krane 2019, p. 100). As a result, oil exports dropped, and Iran entered a severe period of stagflation by 2012. It is estimated that the sanctions cost Iran US\$ 133 million a day in revenues only in 2013 (Saikal 2019, p. 119).

When it comes to the military, the oil boom price instigated a spike in procurements, particularly from China, Russia, and North Korea (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2007, p. 320). The military budget rose from US\$ 3,71 billion in 2003 to US\$ 16,4 billion in 2012 and closing at US\$ 9,9 billion in 2014 (World Bank n.d.n). In 2003, the budget consumed 2,4% of the GDP, increasing to 3,3% in 2006 and closing in 2014 at 2,2% – a tiny fraction compared to the GCC countries (World Bank n.d.k). Iranian military doctrine is mainly defensive, focusing on hybrid warfare to resist external incursions, anti-ship technology, and long-range ballistic missile capacities (Rich 2012, p. 475). It focuses on deterrence by stocking unconventional retaliation capabilities that could raise an attacker's cost (Juneau 2015, p. 58). Moreover, Iran has strategic depth concerning other Persian Gulf countries, with an advantage in mobilization resources

⁴⁴ Crude oil, NGPL, and other liquids from the EIA database (see: <https://www.eia.gov>).

(Ward 2009, p. 314). There was 580 thousand personnel in 2003 and 563 thousand in 2014 (World Bank n.d.a).

Since 2003, IRGC has increased its intelligence and military hold in Iraq, primarily via the Quds force (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2007, p. 338). Defiance, deception, deterrence, and power demonstration orient IRGC's doctrine. In Iraq, IRGC provides training and asymmetric empowerment to the Shia groups (Cordesman 2010; Abedin 2019, p. 33). In other countries such as Syria and Lebanon, IRGC guarantees ties with paramilitary groups and proxies that provide advantageous plausible deniability in regional operations (Cordesman 2010, p. 9). However, when it comes to conventional forces, Iran still depended on equipment acquired by the Shah, which is outdated and suffering from shortages (Abedin 2019, p. 71; Juneau 2015, p. 60). Undeniably, its main improvement is anti-ship missile systems. In January 2005, the CIA confirmed that Iran had the maritime capability to close the Strait of Hormuz, compromising the oil market (Ward 2009, p. 313). Likewise, it started producing Shahab medium-range ballistic missiles, 'a hybrid progeny of the Soviet Scud, the Chinese CSS, and the North Korean Taep'ong series,' which can reach around 2,000 kilometers (Rich 2012, p. 475). As a result, by the end of the period, Iran had one of the region's largest mid-range ballistic missile inventories (Juneau 2015, p. 63).

However, the defense system's dual structure (army and IRGC) is often pointed out as a weakness (Ward 2009, p. 299; Juneau 2015, p. 61; Saikal 2019, p. 147). There is competition for limited resources, poorly integrated forces, combat inefficiency, inadequate cooperation and communication, and high politicization. Saikal (2019, p. 147) stresses that both army's and IRGC's forces' quality is also somewhat doubtful due to ill equipment. Crippling sanctions made it almost impossible for Iran to acquire high-tech weapons and modernize its conventional capabilities (Cordesman et al. 2014). By 2014, any economic advance from the early 2000s mostly reversed, reducing the GDP and the military expenditure. In Juneau's (2015) words, Iran squandered its opportunity window to become a regional power.

7.2.2.2 Changeable power

Iran's changeable power increased as two traditional foes, Iraq and Afghanistan, turned into friendly governments, and anti-Western sentiments gained traction in the region. The 2005 Iraqi constitution was a significant win for the Iranian model. It established a democratic, federal, and parliamentary republic in which Islam was a source of legislation, and Shias were

the political majority. In March 2008, Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian president to visit Baghdad, declaring a ‘new chapter’ in their ties (Hiro 2018, p. 266). Moreover, Iran strengthened its relations with Syria via agreements and security pacts between 2004 and 2007 (Hiro 2018, p. 254) and increased its commitment to Hezbollah after the 2006 Lebanese war (Ehteshami 2012, p. 123). Thus, Iran consolidated a more robust regional position with stronger partnerships.

There was also general empowerment of revisionist groups. The War on Terror and the Lebanese war increased the general opposition to American and Israeli politics, signaling a growing resentment of the regional order (Juneau 2015, p. 77). Iran profited from this general state of dissatisfaction and augmented its revolutionary rhetoric (Ehteshami 2012, p. 126). At the pace that Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad improved their political power, Iran got stronger. Here it is visible how Iran interconnects its sources of stable and changeable power. A crucial leg of its deterrence strategy is unconventional warfare via proxies (Ward 2009, p. 321). By intertwining its assistance to groups with a shared ideology of resistance, Iran acquires leverage while avoiding direct war costs. It also pressures neighboring countries to recoil with Iran’s ambitions, at least partly, or else it can threaten their own domestic legitimacy.

The anti-imperialist rhetoric also resonated beyond the region, and many Global South countries defended Iran’s nuclear ambitions. During Ahmadinejad’s term, Iran deepened ties with Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Bolivia (Seliktar 2012, p. 148). In 2010, Turkey, Brazil, and Iran brokered a nuclear deal under the South-South cooperation clout, mostly overlooked by traditional powers (Tol 2010). Iran also improved ties with India, China, and Russia (Saikal 2019, p. 13). However, as seen in the second triangle, revisionist rhetoric boosts GCC countries’ insecurity. Eventually, Ahmadinejad’s discourse and the perceived nuclear empowerment drove some GCC members to mistrustfully readjust their posture (Lawson 2011, p. 54). After 2008, there was more vigorous criticism from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Moreover, with mounting sanctions, European countries and Russia and China on a smaller scale found it hard to continue enhancing economic ties with Iran.⁴⁵

Finally, it is interesting to examine the revolutionary appeal limitations, as virtually none of the 2011 protests showed interest in being associated with Iran (Kurzman 2012, pp. 162–163;

⁴⁵ While they shared with Iran the interest in balancing the United States, China and Russia did not want a nuclear-armed Tehran and voted in favor of the UNSC sanctions Juneau 2015, p. 71.

Chubin 2012). That is mainly because Iran's regional appeal decreased since 2009 when tens of thousands took the streets to protest Ahmadinejad's reelection in what became known as the Green Movement. With Khamenei's aval, the IRGC and the army crushed the protestors with violence, imprisonment, and persecutions (Seliktar 2012, p. 164). Universities were closed, and some foreign media banned, resulting in widespread international condemnation (Hiro 2018, p. 229). By the time the Arab Uprisings arrived, Iran's popularity in the Middle East had already mingled (Ehteshami 2012, p. 124; Kurzman 2012, p. 162). Moreover, the need to preserve Syria's ruling elite in power despite the popular demonstrations against the autocrat in 2011 has shown the shortcomings of the Iranian revolutionary discourse, even harming ties with other revisionist actors, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad (Ostovar 2018).

7.2.3 Saudi Arabian power

7.2.3.1 Stable power

The selected period represented a moment of steady empowerment to the monarchy, as the high oil prices allowed economic and military expansion. Saudi Arabia amounts to about 20% of the proven world's oil reserves and around 4% of the proven natural gas (Cordesman et al. 2014). After almost two decades of low economic growth, the 2004 oil price surge heated the economy. The GDP rose from US\$ 215,8 billion in 2003 to US\$ 519 billion in 2008, dropping to US\$ 429 billion in 2008 due to the global crisis and closing in ascendance in 2014 at US\$ 756,3 billion (World Bank n.d.f). The GDP growth rate fluctuated from 11,2% in 2003 to 3,6% in 2014 (World Bank n.d.i). However, governmental debt, which, in 2004, reached almost 60% of the GDP, reduced progressively throughout the period, arriving at 1,5% in 2014.⁴⁶ The period also pointed to trade diversification, steadily increasing crude oil sales to Asian markets, particularly to China. Under these conditions, Saudi Arabia invested in extracting technology and securing energy facilities, spending more than US\$ 1,2 billion only between 2002 and 2004 (Barnes and Jaffe 2006, p. 149).

Saudi Arabia is dependable on oil revenues, accounting for around 80% of its budget and 45% of its GDP (Cordesman et al. 2014, p. 78). The distribution of petrodollars had cemented the population's reliance on subsided services like electricity, water, and gasoline

⁴⁶ Numbers from the CEIC database (see: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/saudi-arabia/government-debt--of-nominal-gdp>).

(Krane 2019, p. 116). Programs to encourage the private sector and diversify the economy did not advance in the period, perpetuating the vulnerability to the oil market. Equally important is the demographic context: a young, increasingly unemployed population produces social-economic pressures (Niblock 2006, p. 74; Krane 2019, p. 115). From 1982 to 2003, the population rose from 7 million to 22 million (Barnes and Jaffe 2006, p. 144). Unemployment, inequality, and dependence on cheap foreign labor signaled the need for fiscal reforms, mostly ignored during the period (Hiro 2018, p. 245).

The 2004 oil price boom also led to stronger militarization. Saudi military expenditures grew exponentially, from US\$ 18,7 billion in 2003 to US\$ 80,76 billion in 2014 (World Bank n.d.o). The progression of spending accelerated after 2011, with the kingdom's air and land warfare defense and offense capabilities enlarging considerably (Rich 2012, p. 478). The defense budget consumed between 8,6% of the GDP in 2003 and 10,6% in 2014 (World Bank n.d.l). In 2014, Saudi Arabia became the fourth biggest military spender, behind only the United States, China, and Russia. In addition, they focus on sophisticated weaponry, which, in their turn, required continued foreign technical expertise and assistance (Cronin 2013, p. 25).

Saudi Arabia invests in having an effective defense system via a modern and equipped air force as the first line of deterrence and an 'over the horizon reinforcement by the US to deal with high-level and enduring regional conflicts' (Richter 2014, p. 185). Their air force was the most sophisticated in the region, the only one with AWACS radars for surveillance, modern intelligence gathering, and offensive and defensive operations (Cordesman 2010; Rich 2012, p. 477). They invest significantly in armored fighting vehicles, overpassing Iran in quantity and quality. They also have 'a mix of large and medium surface assets' that enhanced the naval defense ability (Cordesman 2010). However, it rested behind Iran in artillery, rocket inventory, and mainly personal. The military personnel increased from 215 thousand in 2003 to only 251 thousand in 2014, roughly half of Iran's numbers (World Bank n.d.b). As discussed in the previous chapters, Riyadh's decision to avoid conscription and unwillingness to invest in a military culture hinders recruiting and mobilizing (Rich 2012, p. 477; Cronin 2013, p. 25).

However, according to Cronin (2013, p. 25), the high military investment did not remove the gap between Saudi Arabian endogenous capacities and the sophistication of the acquired equipment. Thus, it continued to depend on foreign assistance during the period. Moreover, as Richter (2014, p. 184) stresses, the country lacks a consistent command structure and chain of

communication among the military branches, leading to often inability to handle complicated operations. Nevertheless, in 2011, the military showcased for the first time its ability to mobilize a battalion-sized force of around 1000 troops to intervene in Bahrain. In conclusion, the period represented an expansion of Saudi Arabia's stable power, but the expansion exposed limitations. As a cautionary tale, it reveals the structural constraints that still hamper Saudi Arabia's possibilities to become a regional power, despite evident economic and military improvement.

7.2.3.2 Changeable power

The Iraqi invasion had much less geopolitical benefits for Saudi Arabia than for Iran, as the new Shia government did not ensure a new ally for Riyadh. While Saddam was perceived as a threat, the monarchy was against the US's military action, fearing regional instability. Nevertheless, the relations with the United States continued to comprise collaboration in a wide range of military and counterterrorism activities during the selected period, not affected by these criticisms (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2007, p. 79). Also, Saudi Arabia boosted its economic, cultural, and military cooperation with China and made overtures to Russia (Saikal 2016). Most importantly, the relations with other Middle Eastern countries continued positive, even showing some progress with Syria before 2011. Notably, there was a unique degree of interaction between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, including a secret agreement on nuclear cooperation (Russell 2005, p. 68; Saikal 2016). Relations with Iran, however, stalled and worsened after 2006.

Overall, Saudi Arabian changeable power emanated from its leadership position within the GCC, its authoritative place among the Sunni Islamic community, and its status as an oil powerhouse. As the Arab Uprisings shook the regional political scenario and weakened traditional Arab leaders, the Persian Gulf monarchies, mostly only scratched by the wave of protests, gained influence among other Arab countries. Since 2011, the GCC became 'more emboldened in military terms, more ambitious in diplomatic terms, and less receptive to outside influence' – in what some called the 'Gulf Moment' (Gaub 2015).

The Arab Uprisings, therefore, became an opportunity window for Saudi Arabia to broaden its regional reach and appeal. It assisted many struggling Arab countries with political and economic crises and organized counter-revolutionary action to maintain local stability in the Persian Gulf (Al-Rasheed 2011; Malmvig et al. 2016). Between 2011 and 2014, Riyadh pledged roughly US\$ 22,7 billion in regional aid, particularly to Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, and

Oman (Richter 2014, p. 179; Wehrey 2015, p. 72). In addition, it became a prominent supporter of Sunnis rebels in Iraq and Syria, a pivotal ally to Sisi's government in Egypt, and a direct enforcer of order in Yemen and Bahrain. Since 2011, Riyadh became a much more proactive and influent actor in the Middle East with a say in most geopolitical events, which boosted its changeable power.

7.3 Persian Gulf's balance of power

The invasion and civil war made Iraq no longer a candidate for regional leadership while empowered the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Fürtig (2007) and Barzegar and Agharebparast (2012) argue that Washington replaced Baghdad on a tripolar regional competition. However, the United States has been part of the Persian Gulf's geopolitical game as an extra-regional power since 1980. Thus, the argument for Washington being a 'substitute' for Iraq is shaky. Instead, I contend that the regional system continued multipolar, without a local hegemon or leader, while highly penetrated by the interests of a strong extra-regional actor, the United States.

Table four: stable power in 2003 - 2014

	GDP (current USD)			GDP growth rate			Military spending (current USD)			Military personnel		
	2003	2009	2014	2003	2009	2014	2003	2009	2014	2003	2009	2014
US	11,4 Tn	14,4 Tn	17,5 Tn	2,8 %	-2,5%	2,5%	440,5 Bn	705, 9 Bn	647, 7 Bn	1,48 k	1,56 k	1,38 k
Iran	153,5 Bn	416, 3 Bn	432,6 Bn	8,7 %	1%	4,6%	3,71 Bn	12,5 8 Bn	9,9 Bn	580 k	563 k	563 k
Saudi Arabia	215,8 Bn	429 Bn	756,3 Bn	11,2 %	-2%	3,6%	18,7 Bn	41,2 Bn	80,7 Bn	215 k	249 k	251, 5 k
Iraq	*2004 36,6 Bn	111, 7 Bn	234,6 Bn	- 33 %	3,3%	0,7%	*2004 613,7 MM	3,23 Bn	6,92 Bn	432 k	659 k	209 k

Source: author's elaboration ⁴⁷

If the 1990s represented a unipolar moment, the 2000s showed that unipolarity was just that, a moment. While the United States was still the most powerful country, the world polarity was reconfiguring, with emerging powers (particularly China, Russia, and India) expanding

⁴⁷ All data comes from World Bank Database. Unfortunately, there I could not find data for 2003 in Iraq, thus the first column for GDP and military spending indicates the data for 2004.

their political, economic, and diplomatic roles and demanding participation in defining the global order. Still, the United States has economic and, notably, military superiority. Such superiority is most apparent in the Persian Gulf: Saddam's defeat demonstrated the US's massive capacity to move forces quickly, with or without international support (Ayoob 2011, p. 134). Moreover, the CENTCOM's transference to Qatar intensified the US's security cooperation with GCC in counterterrorism, critical infrastructure, and cyber domain (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 135). As a result, almost all Iran's neighbors hosted some US military presence, displaying the extra-regional power's superiority (Sun and Zoubir 2012, p. 99).

Notwithstanding, the new power configuration left Iran stronger as Iraq could not be a competitor in the foreseeable future (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 141). Whereas the United States failed to build a democratic Iraqi on its own Westernized ideal, Iran's strategy of conducting complex political and proxy campaigns in its neighbor broadened its security (Abedin 2019, p. 122). Moreover, the political empowerment of revisionist groups in the Middle East during the period also contributed to Iran's changeable power, giving it more leverage and influence on regional affairs. Likewise, Iran improved its stable power due to the oil price boom. However, a mix of mismanagement, stagflation, corruption, and, most importantly, growing heavy sanctions made it impossible for Iran to take full advantage of the period.

Saudi Arabia also improved its power during the timeframe. Oil income warmed the economy and led to unforeseeable numbers of military spending. Moreover, by the 2010s, Riyadh was less dependent on the United States to ship its oil and train its military officers (Lippman 2011, pp. 45–46). Whereas Iran remained more potent than the Saudis militarily, Riyadh was catching up, improving relatively in virtually every category (Yetiv and Oskarsson 2018, p. 143). Thus, Iran has strategic depth, a larger mobilization force, and a superior missile capability, while Saudi Arabia has more up-to-date equipment and better aircraft (Barzegar and Agharebparast 2012, p. 17; Rich 2012, p. 477). Besides, Saudi Arabia has a more remarkable set of alliances and state partnerships, and consequently, a less threatening environment.

Hence, after the 2003 invasion, Iran and Saudi Arabia emerged as the Persian Gulf's most substantial power brokers (Aarts and van Duijne 2009, p. 66). Some authors started talking about a 'Cold War' between them immediately after Saddam's fall (Gause 2014; Ryan 2019). However, this term is not the most appropriate one, as their relations kept on good terms until 2006. In fact, the selected period begins during the most cordial moment between Iranians and

Saudis but eventually ends in a rivalry far superior than the one in the 1980s, involving a sectarian war on words and proxies conflicts. As the dependent variable shows, the period represented a moment of transition from constructive rapprochement to the consolidations of a Saudi-Iran rivalry, with no direct alteration in their ties with the United States, despite the partial US-Iran appeasement with the Joint Plan of Action signed on November 24th, 2013.

At first glance, the balance of power explains the changes that drove the new ‘stable marriage’ triangle. With Iranian power growing, Saudi Arabia balanced externally with its traditional partners and internally by increasing military expenditure. Nevertheless, such assessment disregards the complex process of losing reliance that led to this scenario, something the intervening variables reveal next. Moreover, the intervening variables help understand how the nuclear deal was achieved and which factors related to the US-Iran proximity conditioned Saudi Arabia’s proactivity. Finally, whereas the war in Yemen (2015) and the JCPOA implementation (2015) are outside this thesis’s chronological scope, the following analysis is pertinent for understanding the fifth triangle, still under construction.

7.4 The intervening variables

7.4.1 First intervening variable: status satisfaction

- It showcases the country’s ambitions towards the system.
- The ideational variable discusses if a country’s perception of its ascribed status matches its aspired status.
- It shifts the parameters towards revisionism or continuity.

7.4.1.1 US’s status satisfaction

The United States is a status quo actor who aspires to global leadership. In their view, the world should eventually adopt their economic (capitalist), political (democracy), and social (individualist) model (Buzan 2008, p. 557). Its powerful position, unmatched especially in military terms, meant that its status aspiration equaled the ascription. Nevertheless, globalization and the experience of unipolarity in the 1990s led the United States to be status hyper-sensitive. Perceiving there is no substitute for its global leadership and that the emergence of non-compliant actors is a peril to the international order, Washington acts as a ‘worried sheriff’ with the unmanageable task of monitoring the entire global community (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008).

The previous chapter detected a lack of clarity related to identifying an enemy or rival. However, the 9/11 attacks posed global terrorism as a new foe whom Washington could idealize itself fighting against. The attack triggered a sense of security collapse in the country, marking an ideational turning point – with people often referring to the pre-and-post-9/11 era (Flibbert 2006, p. 350). In the words of President George W. Bush, ‘the gravest danger facing America and the world is outlaw regimes,’ and they needed to ‘be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction’ (White House 2002a). Considering that the War on Terror focused mainly on Islamist extremism, the redefinition of the US’s enemies inserted counterterrorism into the list of the US’s top priorities in the Middle East (Bahgat and Sharp 2014, p. 28). Thus, since then, FPE must find ways to implement the fight against terrorism in the Carter Doctrine.

This variable requires a glance at how others within the regional system perceived the US’s ambitions. While Iran continued to reject Washington’s regional role, the systemic change contributed to the US’s status satisfaction because it enhanced its changeable power via new political and security ties with Iraq. Moreover, the GCC countries rely on Washington’s protection, and, during the period, they deepened their security ties with the extra-regional power. These elements indicate there was no dissonance between status aspiration and ascription. However, the military permanence and lack of multilateral commitment in regional conflicts have catalyzed anti-Americanism and some criticism from partners. The civil war in Iraq, the empowerment of revisionist regional actors, and the continuation of terrorism on a much larger scale with ISIS: all demonstrated that the US’s policies since 2003 had failed (Pressman 2009). As a result, regional resistance to their policies became increasingly violent and pervasive, making it unlikely to attract supporters – domestically or internationally.

By the end of the period, one can see signs pointing to a status discrepancy, not because the United States ambited more than it was being ascribed, but because it was ascribed more than it was willing or able to be. President Obama often indicated that by mentioning the need for allies to ‘share the burden’ of protecting the region (Goldberg 2016). Moreover, the United States chose not to intervene to protect traditional partners or promote democracy during the 2011 uprisings, raising questions about how much it was still interested in keeping its ‘indispensable nation’ function. However, that does not mean that the United States is less of a status quo actor, nor that its ambitions had changed. For the 2003-2014 period, the status

satisfaction variable still pushed the country towards protecting regional order, securing partners and the oil market, and promoting counterterrorism activities. In other words, it still idealized the position of the global leader and protector of a conservative regional order, essential to the maintenance of its strategic interests.

7.4.1.2 Iran's status satisfaction

Iran idealized for itself a leadership position since the 1979 revolution, being a revisionist actor because it understood that other actors in its status community did not subscribe to or even sabotage that ambition. This dissonance between the aspiration and the ascription continued in the 2003-2014 period. Moreover, the growing centrality of the nuclear program provided new grounds for Iranians to argue for revisionism. They believe that by having their nuclear plans securitized and sanctioned, the international community denied Iran the same rights other countries have. As a result, Iran accused Americans and their allies of 'nuclear colonialism,' deliberately isolating Tehran from the international political scenario and depriving it of its deserved power.

After 2003, the environment appeared less restrictive, primarily due to the power improvement. The transformation of Iraq from an enemy into a friend improved Iran's position and reduced its threat perceptions. However, it also brought more US troops to the region, which went against Iran's ideal regional system. Moreover, after being listed as part of the 'axis of evil,' Iran suspected, based on leaked reports from Washington, that it could be the next target of the War on Terror (Hiro 2018, p. 191). Hence, it is possible to see a dualist effect similar to the one detected in the previous triangle (1990-2003). Both wars in Iraq (1990 and 2003) improved Iran's regional position while resulting in a higher US presence in the Persian Gulf. Thus, far from concluding that a systemic shift only reduces or increases a country's threat perception, this variable shows that balance of power changes bring both opportunities and risks.

Iran wanted to be seen as a regional leader and a model for others to emancipate themselves from oppression and Western alignment. President Rouhani's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, portrayed Iran as a 'solid regional power contributing positively to regional stability' (Zarif 2014). However, their main obstacle was the US's presence, which they saw as disadvantageous for endogenous stability. Nevertheless, Iran's rhetoric against Western neo-imperialism and its defense of Palestine captivated a significant part of the Middle Eastern audiences, growingly fed by anti-American feelings (Ayoob 2011, p. 136). Thus, while Iran still

was dissatisfied with its status ascription, its empowerment (stable and changeable) enhanced its leverage and influence during the period.

On the Iranian understanding, Washington and its allies denied Tehran a leadership position by blocking its economic development, constraining its regional behavior, and refusing its inclusion on any negotiation table. Hence, the nuclear sanctions were seen as one more US's move to keep Iran weaken, isolated, and far from its potential (Keynoush 2016, p. 158). In the Supreme Leader's words, Washington expected 'submission and surrender to its hegemony' (Fathi 2013). Here is essential to stress how much the nuclear program is linked with the ambition of being seen as a regional leader. Gaining access to the nuclear club meant being treated as equal by the Western powers, having hedging capability for deterrence, and obtaining the prestige and respect Iran believed it deserved (Kinch 2016, p. 147).

In a nutshell, Iran felt its rightful position is denied due to the US-inclined regional order (Barzegar and Agharebparast 2012, p. 13). Nevertheless, it is unfeasible to define the period as entirely restrictive or permissive for Iran. While Saddam's toppling and Shia groups' empowerment was positive, growing isolation and more substantial US military presence were negative. Iran saw itself frequently excluded from conventional regional politics while improving ties with non-state revisionist actors in tandem. This duality is a characteristic of the Iranian revisionist-pragmatic international behavior. It charges its rhetoric with ideas of revolution, resistance, and anti-imperialism in a permissive environment, projecting ideational ambitions. This projection is attractive to non-traditional actors seeking revisionism but is repellent to more conservative actors that depend on the United States. Conversely, in a restrictive environment, Iran returns to ideas of collective endogenous security, independentism, and Islamic solidarity to ensure its regional position and reduce threats.

Presidents Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani assessed the environment differently, as the FPE variable further discusses. Here is central to point out that Ahmadinejad negatively impacted the country's political image. By 2007, relations with the GCC countries strained, as well as with Europeans (Juneau 2015, p. 84). Together with growing sanctions, this administration reversed Khatami's gains and worsened Iran's changeable power. By the time Rouhani became president, tensions and skepticism towards Tehran's intentions made it highly isolated amidst other regional actors (Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016, p. 3), assuring that Iran continued a revisionist state dissatisfied with its ascribed status.

7.4.1.3 Saudi Arabia's status satisfaction

Saudi Arabian ambitions towards the system revolved around maintaining the conservative regional order and ensuring regime stability. Ideally, the order's protector should be an extra-regional power, as the country believes local actors are inherently untrustful (Rich 2012, p. 480). This variable shows that, throughout the period, the Saudis were steadily growing dissatisfied with the status quo, as they got suspicious of Iran and did not see the United States as reliable as before. In a nutshell, a combination of new threat perceptions and uncertainty towards the order continuity led the monarchy to expand its regional ambitions. As the dependent variable explains in detail, while empowerment was necessary for Riyadh to start having an influence-seeking behavior, escalating status dissatisfaction rationalizes its motivations for such change.

First, the Iraqi invasion dismantled Saudi Arabia's long-standing grand strategy. As discussed so far, the monarchy assumed that Iran and Iraq should be played out against each other to balance power and maintain multipolarity. Riyadh perceived Saddam's replacement by Shia politicians as highly problematic for the order because it opened the doors for Iranian influence (Lippman 2011, p. 33). They believed the Americans had offered Iraq to Iranians in 'a golden platter' (Al-Saud, Saud al Faisal bin Abdulaziz 2005), encouraging their expansionism instead of inhibiting. Moreover, the revelations about Iran's nuclear program rang several alarms in Riyadh. To them, such capacities, together with missile superiority, provided Tehran with the means to impose its will in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East (Russell 2005, p. 67). Independently if such perception reflected the strategic reality, it is essential to detect mounting anxiety in Riyadh towards the regional order due to the Iranian empowerment.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia interpreted Iran's empowerment through a 'Shia Crescent' prism, an idea that Iran was organizing and providing financial and military support to a transnational network of revisionist Shias. While that was closer to being a conspiracy theory than reality, many Arab leaders and media insisted on this rhetoric, warning about a Shia plot against the regional order (Al-Rasheed 2011). Saudi Arabia is particularly apprehensive about protests or revolts in its oil-rich Eastern province, where the most Shia population resides. As the dependent variable discusses, a growing ideological schism between Iran and Saudi Arabia manifested itself in their support to opposing sides in many conflicts across the region (Mabon

2016, p. 2). Thus, the Saudis gradually perceived the need to engage in an entangled (ideological and geopolitical) rivalry for regional order against Iran.

Notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia's anxiety was related to not only Iran but also a perceived US disengagement. Some US's decisions triggered Riyadh to believe the extra-regional power was not as keen as before to guarantee order. First, Saudi Arabia disapproved of Bush's ambitions to intervene and promote democracy regionally (Russell 2005, p. 66; Lippman 2011, p. 34). They believe that forced democratization in the Arab world could initiate social unrest, potential threats, and revisionism (Richter 2014, p. 183). Second, the Iraqi debacle revealed the US's limitations in imposing its will. Third, Obama's reticence during the Arab Uprisings, coupled with his promise to shift priorities away from the Middle East, incept a fear of abandonment in the monarchy (Partrick 2016, p. 361; Rickli 2016, p. 4). These events generated questions on whether the United States would secure the GCC's security in the future.

Finally, the Arab Uprisings had a pivotal effect on Saudi Arabia's grand strategy. On the one hand, it brought light to an emerging set of new regional challenges to stability (Rickli 2016). On the other hand, it reduced the regional influence of other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria, all facing their own political crises. Hence, Riyadh could promote itself as the new Arab leader, with domestic stability, a strong economy, and substantial military resources to promote order. Thus, being minorly affected by protests, the monarchy assisted other countries in their economic recovery (Morocco and Lebanon) and halting protesters (Yemen, Bahrain, and Egypt). Moreover, Riyadh started to support more openly non-state actors resisting Iran-backed governments (Syria and Iraq). In this sense, framing its regional role under the Arabic clout served to improve its regional position and check Iranian influence.

To conclude, Saudi Arabia's increased power combined with a new sense of uncertainty about US's and Iran's regional roles gave them a new ambition: proactively protecting the status quo. These assessments compelled the Saudi FPE to realize that proactivity was necessary to maintain a preferable regional order, with or without the US's leadership. Until the end of the period, both the United States and the other GCC countries did not send any clear signals against Saudi Arabia stepping up to protect the order, indicating that the status community received this new ambition positively. Therefore, there was no status dissonance. In this sense, Saudi Arabia is not a revisionist actor as it did not want to change the US-inclined, conservative regional order. Instead, its anxiety towards maintaining the regional order combined with increased

power allowed it to have a promotional behavior, in the sense it wanted to increase and improve its own role in safeguarding the order as it is.

7.4.2 Second intervening variable: Regime identity

- It is the cognitive variable referring to a regime's self-perceived images.
- It provides self-schemas for coping with behavior complexity.
- It narrows the band of possibilities of action.

7.4.2.1 US's regime identity

As discussed in the last three chapters, this is the only variable that did not change throughout the thesis' analysis. The US's independence brought forth the American creed, which cast the country's values as qualitatively better than any other's. For that reason, the United States should promote its mission worldwide, exporting its experience and values. Therefore, this variable reveals a cognitive function that induces the FPE to promote the liberal model as an example to be emulated or forcefully imposed (Monten 2005). This self-image can be accessed via four cognitive lenses – internationalism, progressivism, realism, or nationalism – something that varied in the selected period.

The idea that the United States – and its democratic experiment – are exceptional guides the four lenses, giving the country a self-image of genuine superiority. It returns to George Washington's and Thomas Jefferson's views about civil-religious beliefs, liberty, equality, and self-government (Kinch 2016, p. 85). Thus, exceptionalism mediates how the United States responds to incentives and restrictions from the international environment (Monten 2005, p. 116). Moreover, this identity is also Manicheist, in the sense that they see themselves as 'the greater good' and seek a 'greater evil' to feel ontologically secure. The US's interpretation of reality demands a clear actor or ideology to put itself in opposition to (the British empire, the old European order, the Soviet communism). Without a clear enemy, the United States is under ontological distress, which blurry threat perception.

The 9/11 attacks clarified who this enemy was in the post-Cold War world. To Brands (2016, p. 357), in a 'new era of danger,' Washington believed it should spread its liberal ideas to tackle the root causes of extremism. Bush and the neoconservatives, framing terrorism as a non-democratic product, insisted that the US's democratic model should proactively expand to guarantee its predominance. Thus, the neoconservative thinking was not an aberration but

something consistent with the regime identity, which relates to promoting the model via force and not only by example (Monten 2005).

Bush rekindled the vindicative narratives from Woodrow Wilson and Truman, mixing nationalist and internationalist lenses. These lenses oriented the FPE towards rebuffing multilateralism and rejecting negotiation with non-liberal parties if that indicated reducing the US's power projection. In contrast, the Obama administration returned to a combination of progressive and realist lenses, seeking a self-image projection like those linked to George H.W. Bush. Thus, the variable motivated the FPE towards multilateralism and power-sharing if it promoted the United States as a model to be emulated while reducing – or at least not increasing – its direct engagement in non-crucial conflicts.

7.4.2.2 Iran's regime identity

Iran's identity did not change, still driving the country to see for itself a regional leadership role with Islamic credentials. The revolutionary principles of independentism, pan-Islamism, anti-imperialism, and Shia's resilience define the identity. These elements create the 'mission' to assist other Muslim populations in emancipating themselves while building an order under the Iranian leadership (Amiri et al. 2011, p. 679). In other words, they see themselves as an Islamist role model for others to follow – one that does not collaborate with the global division of power nor is complacent with the US's exploitation (Beeman 2005).

The regime's revolutionary character interconnects ideology with identity, making the FPE perceive themselves as representatives of an 'Islamic city upon a hill.' As a result, they have the cognitive function to expand their revolutionary experiment to the Middle East. That filters out strategies that portray Iran capitulating to a Western-dominated system or accepting a reduced regional role. This ideational identity provides two lenses for interpreting their function: pragmatic or ideologic. While the pragmatic lens orients the FPE to seek independentism, protect the regime, and guarantee its stability, the ideational lens argues for exporting the revolution, promoting anti-imperialist rhetoric, and instigating religious rivalry.

Both pragmatic and ideological lenses drive the FPE to understand Iran's cognitive function as a leader for Muslim emancipation from Western subjugation everywhere. That pushes them towards alliances that boost their influence while reducing the US's regional appeal. During the period, both Khatami's and Rouhani's administrations employed pragmatic lenses, focusing on sovereignty, independentism, and regional inclusion when assessing their

international options. Conversely, Ahmadinejad returned to ideological lenses, stressing revolutionary and anti-imperialist values that informed the regime. As the FPE discusses, he belonged to a political movement that called for a return of Khomeini's export the revolution discourse, promoting a non-compromising and often aggressive self-image of Iran.

7.4.2.3 Saudi Arabia's regime identity

The Saudi Arabian identity continued the same through the selected period as well. It identifies for itself a cognitive function of protecting and promoting Islam worldwide. As discussed in the first triangle, the role is conservative due to tribal and territorial concerns that create deep vulnerability towards systemic stability. Saudi Arabian leadership role among the Islamic community should be projected not only domestically but also regionally. For analytical purposes, the variable effect is to filter out strategies that run the risk of reducing Saudi Arabian authority among the *ummah*, increasing the influence of other Islamic authorities, or endangering regional stability.

Chapter five reasoned that the Iranian revolution and other domestic disruptive events on the eve of the 1980s provoked ontological insecurity in Saudi Arabia. That produced two interpretative lenses to grasp the regime identity: pan-Islamist or sectarian. As the FPE shows, distinct understandings about opportunities, threats, and systemic environment result in different lenses' employment. Darwich (2014) argues that the 2011 Arab Uprisings represented a new ontological insecurity moment for Saudi Arabia. She claims that to cope with cognitive dissonance, Saudi Arabia started to portray itself as the guardian of moderate Islam in contrast to regional Islamist parties (Darwich 2014, p. 19). However, it is not convincing that 2011 had the same effects on Saudi identity as 1979 because it has always promoted itself as a conservative actor. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists' political empowerment during the Arab Uprisings only led to the re-enhancement of this element of the regime identity.⁴⁸

This variable's value lies in explaining the cognitive lenses from which the FPE can make decisions. The conservative Islamic role rejects policies that could increase regional stability or reduce Saudi Arabia's dominance in topics related to Islam. Therefore, during the selected period, it filtered out options such as promoting the Arab Uprisings demonstrations if

⁴⁸ In fact, the Muslim Broderhood broke off with Riyadh in 1991 already. Since then, it has promoted the idea that the Sharia law can be implemented via elections, an idea that earned the 'undying hostility of Saud royals since it undercut the legitimacy of the dynastic rule' (Hiro 2018, p. 246).

that meant threatening its position. Moreover, this identity boosts fears about the rise of rival Islamist projects in the region, particularly the Iranian one, due to its revisionism and Shia tendency. Therefore, King Abdullah's choice tilted towards sectarian lenses to interpret the identity when realizing the environment was getting progressively restrictive for motivations that went beyond regime survival – a topic discussed further in the FPE section.

7.4.3 Third intervening variable: Foreign Policy Executives

- It is the agency variable, indicating leaders' tendencies and preferences regarding foreign policy.
- It describes how those in charge of foreign policy perceive the systemic environment, which interpretative lenses for the regime identity they employ, and what are their political inclinations.
- It tilts the country's international behavior in the direction of the FPE's worldviews.

7.4.3.1 US's foreign policy executives

Considering that humans make decisions, a policy can tilt in different directions depending on who is in power, intervening on the explanative chain. The selected period comprises Republican George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Democrat Barack Obama (2009-2016). This variable shows how their different political tendencies manifested in the strategies towards the Middle East. On the one hand, Bush's neoconservatism tilted the country towards non-negotiable policies, consequently boosting anti-Americanism. On the other hand, Obama's realist-progressive preferences opened room for strategic reassessment, producing, simultaneously, expectation and skepticism towards change in the region.

As discussed, the 9/11 attacks created political momentum for neoconservatives. This wing of the Republican party combines a vindictive interpretation of the liberal identity with a negative perception of the systemic environment. As a result, the logic of preemptive action against possible threats to the US's dominance motivates them (Flibbert 2006, pp. 333–334). Bush subscribed to neoconservatism, enthusiastic to the possibility of regime change in the Middle East. He employed a language of right vs. wrong, good vs. evil: for him, 'either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' (US Diplomatic Mission to Germany October, 2001).

The idea that the United States was genuinely good and had the mission to spread its superior qualities worldwide hit a cord with Bush's evangelical beliefs. He appeared to firmly

believe that a crusade against terrorism was part of the US's mission against 'forces of darkness' (Flibbert 2006, p. 337). Neoconservatism also pushed for nationalist interpretations of the US's global role, detected in Vice-President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. They assumed that only a retaliatory campaign against Al 'Qaeda was insufficient to guarantee the US's prestige. Both men assumed that it was necessary to do more to demonstrate the severe consequences of attacking the United States (Onea 2012, p. 154).

The Bush Doctrine showed a shallow understanding of the Middle East, presuming that the people would install a democracy on the US's molds when autocrats were ousted. Therefore, Bush rejected the realist lens, which prescribed power to be used only to restore the status quo *ante*. Also, he refused the progressive lens, which prescribed the model to be promoted only as an example to be followed. In Bush's Secretary State Condoleezza Rice's words: 'the United States pursued [for decades] stability at the expense of democracy in this region, and we achieved neither. Now we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspiration of all people' (US Department of State 6/20/2005). This way, Bush differentiated himself from both his father and Nixon, as well as Carter and Clinton. Moreover, as already mentioned, by acting to provoke regime change for preventive reasons, Bush took the United States outside the Carter Doctrine track for the first time.

Combined with the vindictive rhetoric, this naive grasp of regional politics explains much of the Bush administration's setbacks in the Persian Gulf. They defined enemies not only in terms of national threat but by listing those who can live up to their values system (Kinch 2016, p. 103). Under this worldview, Bush added Iran to his 'axis of evil' catalog and rejected Iran's assistance in Iraq and Lebanon (Keynough 2016, p. 206). The administration perceived Iran as an enemy defying its authority and its benevolent objectives. For this reason, Washington argued that Iran was ineligible for having a complete nuclear program (Kinch 2016, p. 146). The narrative against the Iranian nuclear program because it was inherently untrustful gained a more aggressive and non-negotiable tone during this administration.

As the Persian Gulf was perceived as crucial for the global economy, the Bush Doctrine kept protecting partners, guaranteeing security, and safeguarding oil markets. Thus, Bush subscribed to the open doors philosophy, which saw the liberal values as nonnegotiablely linked to free trade worldwide (Dueck 2006, p. 158). He planned for the region's economic liberalization and integration into the globalized economy (Morrissey 2016, p. 16). Therefore,

attempts to impose US-like liberal democracy walked hand in hand with economic cooperation projects and free trade agreements. Moreover, people criticized the failure in Iraq and felt that Washington designated all those who did not follow its standards as undemocratic. By the end of Bush's term, anti-Americanism was at its peak in the Middle East.

There was a genuine national debate regarding the US's role in the Middle East during the 2008 presidential election (Zenko 2018, p. 7). Democrat candidate Barack Obama capitalized on domestic war fatigue and his opposition to the Iraqi war, promising all combatant troops' withdrawal and a diplomacy-first foreign policy (Kitchen 2016). He believed that the Iraq experience served as a cautionary tale against the preemptive use of force and regime change missions (Halabi 2009, p. 129). The first black-American president was the son of a Kenyan immigrant born in Hawaii, unmistakably cosmopolitan and with quite different values from his predecessor. He promised to reduce the neoconservative's vindictive stand and return to a more multilateral, consensual, and restrained international behavior.

After Obama's election, the FPE turned to a realist-progressive interpretation of the US's identity. He aimed to tone down the exceptionalism rhetoric and seek ways to reduce commitments in the Middle East without endangering partners or the oil market. Thus, his priority continued since the 1970s, namely secure leadership and interests, but with different means. Obama was skeptical about the advantages of promoting regime change, and he prioritized a more conventional approach with immediate tactical gains (Akbarzadeh 2011, p. 6). His administration's realist preference defended that force and intervention should only be used for situations of direct national interests. Kitchen (2016) argued that Obama admired George W. H. Bush's realism and preferred multilateral approaches to problem-solving.

In Obama's words, 'call me a realist in believing we can't, at any given moment, relieve all the world's misery' and 'we have to choose where we can make a real impact' (Goldberg 2016). Therefore, he did believe the country should rule globally as an example. According to his undersecretary of state for political affairs, 'there is no substitute for determined American leadership in the Middle East' (Middle East Institute 2009). Nevertheless, unlike Clinton and Bush, Obama was pragmatic, employing terms such as 'bridging divides' instead of 'good vs. evil,' stressing the importance of acting in concert with allies. Multilateralism and encouraging traditional partners to contribute more to security were key to Obama's strategy (Kitchen 2016).

'Part of his mission as President, Obama explained, is to spur other countries to take action for themselves, rather than wait for the U.S. to lead. The defense of the liberal

international order against jihadist terror, Russian adventurism, and Chinese bullying depends in part, he believes, on the willingness of other nations to share the burden with the U.S. This is why the controversy surrounding the assertion—made by an anonymous administration official to *The New Yorker* during the Libya crisis of 2011—that his policy consisted of ‘leading from behind’ perturbed him. ‘We don’t have to always be the ones who are upfront,’ he told me. ‘Sometimes we’re going to get what we want precisely because we are sharing in the agenda.’ (Goldberg 2016)

During a visit to Egypt in June 2009, Obama spoke about new beginnings, citing references from the Koran and the Bible to state that ‘Islam is part of America’ (White House 2009). He hoped to reduce anti-Americanism by advocating a commitment to treating Muslim countries as equal (Akbarzadeh 2011, p. 5). He said that ‘America does not presume to know what is best for everyone’ (White House 2009). The speech emphasized Iran’s nuclear project as one of the administration’s key preoccupations. Seliktar (2012, p. 162) points out that Obama stressed in his campaign that the strategy to coerce Iran with sanctions without preconditions had not worked, and it was necessary to change tactics. He argued that ‘American interests are advanced by direct negotiations with our enemies, not engaging in self-imposed ostracism’ (Seliktar 2012, p. 162).

Under his view, the Dual Containment and the War on Terror had hindered geopolitical priorities, and a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear issue was pressing (Parsi 2017). Therefore, the administration designed a Dual-Track strategy based on offering first incentives to Iran while clarifying the penalties that could follow. In other words, it revised its tactics to seek a new way forward based on mutual respect and no preconditions (El-Khawas 2011, p. 95). Obama seemed to have concluded that Iran was a potential regional power and that any Persian Gulf strategy could not ignore it. Thus, he started sending signals to Tehran for negotiation. In January 2009, he sent letters to Khamenei, and, in March, he conveyed a message during Nowruz (the Iranian new year celebration), talking about Persian culture’s richness, the Iranians’ peace-loving nature, and the constructive regional role Iran could play (Akbarzadeh 2011, p. 163). In his words:

‘I’ve made it clear to Iran’s leaders and people that my country is prepared to move forward. The question now is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build. I recognize it will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude, and resolve. There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect. But it is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point. This is not simply about America’s interests. It’s about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path.’ (White House 2009)

As Iran did not respond to these signals, Obama started the second track of his policy, increasing pressure. Obama gathered momentum to impose new bilateral and multilateral sanctions already in 2010, which were more severe and punitive. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton explained that ‘by following the diplomatic path we are on, we gain credibility and influence with a number of nations who would have to participate in order to make the sanctions regime as tight and as crippling as we would want it to be’ (Committee on Foreign Affairs 2009). The strategy of first offering carrots and only then sticks worked for Obama, who managed to sign the first deal between the United States and Iran by 2013, the Geneva Interim Agreement, which I further discuss in the dependent variable.

Obama’s realist and multilateral preference must be associated with a perception of policy limitations. Since his first year in office, the president signaled the intention to recalibrate global priorities to prepare for an Asian-Pacific era (Anthony 2015, p. 41). The realist preference tilted to the idea that a strategy towards Asia required a simultaneous Middle East retrenchment, which meant ‘pulling back, spending less, cutting risk, and shifting burdens to allies’ (Goldberg 2016). Hence, it was crucial to find a way to include Iran in the Persian Gulf security arrangement that compelled the country to accept a US-prone order. Simultaneously, regional partners should embrace such a strategy. In Obama’s words, the Iran-Saudi competition ‘requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace’ (Goldberg 2016). Nevertheless, many Middle Easterners saw this ‘Asian Pivot’ as regional disengagement. For them, it displayed a tacit admission that the US’s influence in the region had limitations (Akbarzadeh 2011, p. 6).

In conclusion, Obama’s realist-progressive inclinations tilted the decision-making towards multilateralism, retrenchment, and an immediate gains preference. The progressive inclination promoted the United States as a model to be emulated, mostly rejecting the previous administration’s vindictive character. When the Arab Uprisings started, Obama chose caution, avoiding supporting or condemn protestors.⁴⁹ He paid lip service to missionaryism by focusing on diplomacy and statecraft and rebuffing military force when national interests were not threatened (Kitchen 2016). That explains Obama’s decision to redeploy thousands of troops

⁴⁹ Goldberg (2016) states that Obama showed initial excitement with a possible democratic wave in the Middle East but grew quickly disappointed with the events, which ‘made him realize how much the chaos there was distracting from other priorities.’

only against ISIS and not to the Syrian civil war, as the first represented a direct threat to the US interest whereas the second did not.

7.4.3.2 Iran's foreign policy executives

As already discussed, Ayatollah Khamenei supported the conservative faction, whose religious zeal pushed towards anti-Western and conservative international policies. The period comprises three presidencies: the reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), and the pragmatic Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021). Each disagreed on how to achieve Iran's best interests internationally. This variable shows that they tilted Iran's behavior to cooperation, non-compliance, and cooperation again. Whereas Ahmadinejad detected an opportune moment to promote Iran as a non-conformist regional power, Khatami and Rouhani intended to integrate the country diplomatically and economically into the international system. The main difference between the last two rested in the level of Khamenei's consent and factional stuckness each faced.

Khamenei is the most powerful man in the country, capable of dictating all the political 'whats, whos, and whens' (Vatanka 2008). In international relations, his role is to preserve a working dynamic between the factions while safeguarding the revolution's principles (Salimi 2012, pp. 144–145). Khamenei sees Iran as a promoter of political Islam, a voice for the unheard (especially Shias), and a stronghold against imperialist oppression. His angst about integrating Iran in the international system concerns cultural infiltration, as direct contact with the West could deviate people from revolutionary values (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 18). He is particularly skeptical about the possibility of reaching a *détente* with the United States, which he sees as a 'devil in disguise' (Saikal 2019, p. 97).

President Khatami was a reformist who aimed to normalize Iran's international relations and improve ties with regional and Western countries (Takeyh 2009, p. 207). Immediately after the Iraq invasion, Iran tried to reach out to the United States once more, perceiving the increasingly restrictive environment and fearing becoming the next target. Using the Swiss Embassy as an intermediary, Khatami sent a letter to Washington that become known as the 'grand bargain.' It expressed Iran's willingness to discuss its support to Hamas and Hezbollah, the Iraq situation, and the nuclear program (Hiro 2018, p. 191). According to Gary Sick, the grand bargain was:

‘an agenda for a diplomatic process to resolve all of the outstanding bilateral differences between the United States and Iran. On the Iranian side, they acknowledged that they would need to be prepared to deal with our concerns about their WMD activities, their links to terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, and they said in there that they would be prepared to eliminate military support for these organizations and to work to turn Hezbollah, for example, into a purely political and social organization in Lebanon. They recognized that this would be something they would need to do as part of a rapprochement.’ (PBS Frontline October 2007)

It is not entirely clear how much Khamenei was involved, but, considering the great bargain was broadly announced in the Iranian media (PBS Frontline October 2007), it is possible to assume some endorsement on his part. However, the US decision to ignore this effort served as a nail in the coffin for Khatami’s policy. It also directly boosted the popularity of a second-generation conservatism that accused him of being lenient and submissive to the West. Finally, a conservative Majlis ensured that Khatami completed his term without a resolution (Ehteshami and Zweiri 2007, p. 29; Arjomand 2009, p. 172).

From 2003 on, the reformists were progressively marginalized while the hardliners (or neoconservatives) grew in popularity. Targeting Khatami’s alleged willingness to surrender Iran’s rights, hardliners called for a return to the revolution’s tenets, using a socio-economic class struggle lexicon and a robust nationalist rhetoric (Seliktar 2012, p. 141; Saikal 2019, p. 112). The hardliners were fervently ideological, advocating a return to the revolution times, arguing that older clerics became corrupt and should step aside (Juneau 2015, pp. 99–100). They won most of the Majlis seats in 2004 and elected Tehran’s mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as president in 2005. It is critical to stress that Ahmadinejad also had the support of IRGC and other military elites (Arjomand 2009, p. 149).

The son of a low-income family, Ahmadinejad joined the revolution as an activist student, becoming an IRGC member in 1986 during the war against Iraq (Seliktar 2012, p. 150; Juneau 2015, p. 99). He talked in the name of the urban working and lower classes, calling for economic justice, state patronage, and draining corruption, gaining the sympathy of those disillusioned with Khatami’s liberalizing policies. The president promoted himself as a devoted Muslim who believed the Twelver Imam would soon return from his occultation and bring pride to all Iranians (Arjomand 2009). Thus, he presumed it was necessary to return to Khomeini’s ideals, using words like social justice, Islamic struggle, and martyrdom to mobilize support for his policies. As Arjomand (2009, p. 149) puts it, the president portrayed himself as the ultimate representative of the ‘children of the Islamic revolution.’

Ahmadinejad employed a confrontative attitude towards the West and sustained an uncompromising revisionist stand (Saikal 2019, p. 114). He substituted Rafsanjani's and Khatami's pragmatic lenses for ideological ones, underscoring Iranian cognitive function as a revolutionary, anti-status quo regional power. His administration had three main foreign policy goals: assume prominence in the Palestinian cause, bolster regional non-state allies, and achieve nuclear enrichment capacity (Seliktar 2012, p. 143). These objectives reflected the ambitions to be a trailblazer against the status quo. Interestingly, this behavior brought Iran closer to non-regional countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Belarus, which shared dissatisfaction with the global distribution of power (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 16). Thus way, Ahmadinejad understood the growing anti-Americanism in the Middle East and other parts of the world as a permissive signal to boost an antagonist discourse.

The hardliner administration pushed investors away and provoked international criticism. Ahmadinejad became known for his belligerent, unrestrained language, especially when attacking Israel (Ehteshami 2012, p. 122). He replaced Khatami's 'dialogue of civilizations' for a non-compromising stand that had made most of the West uncomfortable. Moreover, hardliners intertwined national pride with the nuclear program. To them, the West was attempting once again to halt Iran's sought for a more prominent position by denying it the right to develop nuclear technology (Kinch 2016, p. 143). This championship of Iran's inherent right to nuclear program stimulated popular indignation with Washington and demanded an even more assertive international posture (Seliktar 2012, p. 200).

Principles such as martyrdom, resistance, exceptionalism, and independentism informed the presidency. In this sense, hardliners framed isolation and nuclear sanctions as positive for proving that the system was unjust and Iran resilient. In a nutshell, Ahmadinejad tilted the Iranian international stance towards non-commitment, seeing nuclear empowerment as a path for Iran's recognition as a regional power. He combined nationalism and anti-imperialism, calling the American bullies and the international system unfair (Kinch 2016, p. 144). For Ahmadinejad, UNSC sanctions only served to boost national resolve (Kinch 2016, p. 149). Thus, he perceived the environment as opportune to stress the regime identity's confrontationist elements. Iran's isolation escalated after Ahmadinejad's re-election, as controversial results provoked waves of protests. It is relevant to stress that the international community highly criticized the protests' repression.

His second term revealed a growing schism between traditional conservatives and hardliners (Saikal 2019, p. 117). Khamenei showed frustration with Ahmadinejad's confrontation and general disobedience (Seliktar 2012, p. 140). To counter the president, the ayatollah set up a Strategic Council for Foreign Relations in 2006, gradually taking him out of the nuclear negotiations (Kinch 2016, p. 56). As Khamenei's function was to balance factions, it is possible to conclude that he lessened his ideological tone because the president's views were becoming detrimental to regime stability. Closer to pragmatism, Khamenei said that 'undoubtedly, the day the relations with America prove beneficial for the Iranian nation, I will be the first one to approve that' (Sadjadpour 2009, p. 17). Eventually, by 2012, the communication between the president and the *faqih* broke down (Saikal 2019, p. 118).

The 2013 elections reflected the interest between traditional factions to return to pragmatism. With the support of a coalition between pragmatics and many conservatives, the cleric Hassan Rouhani became the next president. Rouhani resumed the pragmatic lens, deeming that no promotion of anti-imperialist credentials should harm Iran's most direct national interests. He is a respected academic, diplomat, political activist, and British-educated lawyer with a doctoral degree (Saikal 2019, p. 120). He is also the ultimate insider, having served the Majlis, the Assembly of Experts, the Expediency Council, and the Supreme National Security Council. His credentials made him a person with access to different factions, extensive knowledge about the regime's strengths and weaknesses, and an absolute commitment to its survival (Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016, p. 4). Most importantly, Rouhani had good relations with Khamenei, who saw the new president as a loyalist that could reconnect Iran to its original popular base while improving its regional relations (Saikal 2019, p. 120).

Rouhani campaigned under the platform of 'prudence and hope,' marketing himself as a moderate centrist and promising to limit factional competition to 'save the economy, revive morality, and interact with the world' (Colleau 2016, p. 42). He argued that the path for a better economy must be through accommodating relations with the West and ending sanctions. That did not mean he disagreed that Iran should be a regional power that opposes the status quo. Like Rafsanjani, Rouhani believed Iran was better prepared to become a regional power if it reduced international isolation. In his words, 'Iran's economy has the potential to be among the world's top ten in the next three decades,' and '[economic opening] does not mean letting go of the nation's ideals and principles' (Nasseri 2015).

The administration's priority was to engage with the West for a settlement that would end sanctions and guarantee the right to uranium enrichment (Saikal 2019, p. 121). The pragmatic lens allowed Rouhani to stress independentism and regime survival instead of resistance and revolution exportation. He stated that 'we seek effective and constructive diplomatic relations and focus on mutual confidence-building' (Rouhani 2013b). Moreover, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif, stated that 'our neighbors are our priority' and that 'we cannot promote our interests at the expense of others' (Zarif 2013). Hence, they intended to reduce the GCC's suspicion and boost cooperation.

Additionally, Rouhani contended that working relations with the United States could be possible if the two countries treated each other equally. In his words:

'the relationship between Iran and the United States is a complicated and difficult question. There is a chronic wound, which is difficult to heal. However, it is not impossible provided there is goodwill and mutual respect between the two countries. (..) It seems that extremists on both sides are determined to maintain the state of hostility and hatred between the two states, but logic says that there should be a change of direction in order to turn a new page in this unstable relationship and minimise the state of hostility and mistrust between the two countries' (BBC Monitoring 6/15/2013).

Most importantly, Rouhani had Khamenei's aval to push forward a nuclear settlement with the United States. Khamenei stated that a deal was possible as long as it did not forgo Iran's right to develop its nuclear program. According to Saikal (2019, p. 123), it was the first time the ayatollah and the president voiced a common favorable position on the issue. During Rafsanjani's administration, Khamenei's authority was under construction, making it risky to reach Washington out. During Khatami's term, Khamenei's support would unfavorably balance against the conservatives, who clashed with the reformists. However, in Rouhani's term, Khamenei had the upper hand with a conservative-pragmatic coalition and enough authority to dismiss the president if the initiatives backfired. That allowed Rouhani and Zarif to employ their diplomatic skills and move quickly, reaching in November 2013 the interim agreement with the P5+1 in Geneva. In response, Khamenei called the negotiators 'children of the revolution' with a 'heroic flexibility,' not opposing direct talks (Colleau 2016, p. 49).

Here it is crucial to stress that Rouhani did not abandon Iran's revisionist attitude or reduced the ambitions to establish it as a nuclear powerhouse. The administration continued the goals of guaranteeing Iran's rights to nuclear energy, including enrichment activities (Colleau 2016, p. 44). In Rouhani's words, 'mastering the atomic fuel cycle and generating nuclear power is as much about diversifying our energy resources as it is about who Iranians are as a nation,

our demand for dignity and respect and our consequent place in the world' (Rouhani 2013a). Finally, it is necessary to stress Zarif and Rouhani's diplomatic skills. They employed an innovative communication strategy to explain their ambitions and reduce international hostility (Colleau 2016, p. 44). Zarif specially engaged with social media, wrote journal pieces in English, and gave foreign journalists interviews. In Rouhani's words,

'our success in these negotiations showed that by observing all principles and all the red lines of the Islamic Republic and by expressing the reasonable and logical positions of the Iranian nation, we can call on global powers to respect the rights of the people of Iran. These negotiations showed that we can take future steps towards resolving all disagreements in a determined way.' (The Office of the Supreme Leader 11/25/2013)

In conclusion, this variable shows how a shift between presidencies significantly altered strategic predilections. Here, one can see that the changes are associated with different perceptions about environment restrictiveness and different identarian preferences. Moreover, it stresses the significance of factionalism for Iran's international behavior. In conclusion, it is impossible to explain the JCPOA, adopted in July 2015, without discussing the different priorities Ahmadinejad and Rouhani had and the quality of their relations with Khamenei.

7.4.3.3 Saudi Arabia's foreign policy executives

The monarchical rule was on Abdullah's hands for the selected period, first as Crown Prince (1982-2005) and later as King (2005-2015). As discussed in the previous chapter, King Fahd suffered from severe health problems, and Abdullah became the de facto ruler around 1995. This section reviews Abdullah's nationalist, pan-Islamic, and regionalist preferences. It shows how a series of international and regional events provoked an adjustment of the king's environment perception, driving him towards a sectarian and Arabic-centered discourse to ensure the country's influence. Simultaneously, domestic threats and the need to collaborate with the United States in counterterrorism open the space for the Sudayri clan to enact their preferences on international relations. These elements together reoriented the FPE from conciliation with Iran to direct countering it.

Traditionally, Saudi leaders are aware of the monarchy's vulnerability, and, for that matter, the grand strategy had consisted in balancing Iraq or Iran with the US's backing. In the previous period, Abdullah perceived that a more permissive environment enabled cautious improvement of ties with Iran, which resulted in a period of détente between the two. Abdullah was a nationalist and pragmatic king, very popular with the Saudis, and with good connections

among many Arab tribes in the region (Okruhlik 2003; Wynbrandt 2004). As discussed in the previous chapter, he preferred constructing an endogenous regional security system, one in which Saudi Arabia could thrive as a critical, pivoting decision-maker (Kechichian 2000). Moreover, Abdullah aimed to improve the country's regional image, tarnished after US troops' permanence. For that, he reduced the anti-sectarian rhetoric of his brother Fahd in favor of a more pan-Islamist tone, like King Faisal's.

However, Abdullah perceived that the space for more autonomous behavior reduced after the 9/11 attacks. The monarchy stood against the Iraqi invasion, stating that the Iraqis and other people in the region would not welcome US soldiers (Riedel 2018, pp. 140–141). However, after the war declaration, there was not much left to do other than giving quiet assistance and distance themselves from the aftermath. Moreover, the fight against terrorism at home was a serious challenge to the monarchy, as a hidden Osama bin Laden called for the overthrow of all the monarchies of the Arab Peninsula, the 'traitors' of the Islamic people (Riedel 2018, p. 143). Therefore, the close security partnership with the United States was crucial for the regime's survival. Although, discursively, Saudi Arabia was dissatisfied with Bush's democratic agenda, that did not spoil the relationship. One should not over-analyze Abdullah's remarks on the 'illegitimate foreign occupation' (Georgi 2007), as these were oriented to domestic audiences.

Most importantly, the Iraqi invasion disrupted Riyadh's strategy to balance Iraq or Iran against each other. Without Saddam, the path was clear for Iran to increase its regional influence and seek hegemony. Moreover, Ahmadinejad's election and the international pressure over the nuclear program raised Saudi Arabia's suspicions about Iran (Amiri et al. 2011, p. 685). By the end of 2006, the Sudayri clan's preference for a strong alignment with the US interests against Iran eventually prevailed. Defense Minister Prince Sultan reoriented the international relations away from Abdullah's détente initiatives (Keynoush 2016, p. 167). Princes Saud al Faisal and Bandar backed Sultan, both known critics of the détente (Al Toraifi 2012, p. 244). After perceiving that Iran was gaining influence among Arab policies, particularly after the Lebanese 2006 war, Abdullah also adopted a stand against Iran, telling Iranian foreign minister Mottaki that 'you as Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters' (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2009b). Framing Iran as a non-Arab actor, Abdullah hoped to check its regional influence.

This variable reveals how the FPE steadily changed as a response to Iran's growing power. The monarchy linked the 'Iranian factor' to a series of events provoking instability in Arab countries (Aarts and van Duijne 2009, p. 68). To Abdullah, Iran's nuclear empowerment and its regional behavior became a threat to stability. It is important to remember that he once favored Iran's nuclear empowerment, as shown in the previous chapter. However, after 2005, he started to call for a nuclear-free Persian Gulf, even if that meant heavily sanctioning Iran. In a meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2010, Prince Faisal said it was imperative 'an immediate resolution [for the Iranian nuclear program's threat] rather than a gradual solution' (BBC News 2010). The king said that 'Iran's goal is to cause problems' (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2009b) and that it was 'adventurous in the negative sense' (The Global Intelligence Files 2012). As the following cables reveal, his goal was to convince the United States of harsher action against Iran.

"The position of the King is very clear on Iran," al-Jubeir said. King Abdullah believes that only a show of US strength will stop Iran's expansionist policies and halt its nuclear program, he said, adding that the program is clearly intended to produce nuclear weapons. He noted that the King rejects the argument that military action against Iran will coalesce popular support around President Ahmadinejad" (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2007).

"The King was particularly adamant on this point, and it was echoed by the senior princes as well. Al-Jubeir recalled the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. "He told you to cut off the head of the snake(...) The Foreign Minister, on the other hand, called instead for much more severe US and international sanctions on Iran, including a travel ban and further restrictions on bank lending. Prince Muqrin echoed these views, emphasizing that some sanctions could be implemented without UN approval. The Foreign Minister also stated that the use of military pressure against Iran should not be ruled out" (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2008).

I argue that Abdullah gradually changed his identity lens, replacing pan-Islamism with sectarianism, as it could check Iran's influence. He surfed in the wave of Jordanian King Abdullah's warning about a 'Shia crescent' of instability (Alaaldin 2015), which appealed to many Muslims in the region. That potentialized during the Arab Uprisings, with Riyadh overstating the Iranian 'expansionist project in the region' and its rising influence among the Shia of the Arab world (Al-Rasheed 2011, p. 514). This way, Abdullah claimed that the 'moderate Arabs' should oppose the nuclear project, Iran's interference in Iraq and Lebanon, the Syrian-Iranian alliance, and radical Palestinian groups (Al Toraiji 2012, p. 264). Thus, he saw in the 2011 events an opportunity to expand influence and guarantee Riyadh a position of authority among the Arab communities.

The king, aware of Saudi Arabian empowerment, expanded the country's ambitions facing the growing Iranian influence and. He started to promote Saudi Arabia as an Arab regional leader for stability maintenance, assisting partners during and after the protests as it saw fit. In February 2010, Abdullah proposed that the GCC move towards a confederation, guaranteeing Saudi Arabia a position of indispensability, a significant power broker (Rich 2012, p. 480). In June of the same year, he also proposed the only two other Sunni monarchies, Jordan and Morocco, to join the GCC, expanding the organization's reach and scope. In this sense, Abdullah guaranteed his priorities towards regionalism, as described in the last chapter. However, now, Riyadh's regionalism did not include cooperation with Iran but a new set of policies that checked Tehran's influence in Arab (and Sunni) countries while improving its own.

7.5 The dependent variable

The 2003-2014 period is one of transition, in which relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran advanced towards direct rivalry, whereas the Saudi-US one got slightly weakened and the Iran-US one seesawed from intense confrontation to a reduction of animosities. These transitions were possible due to Iraq's removal as a strategic player in the Persian Gulf, altering the usual balance calculations. At first glance, the balance of power explains the return to the 'stable marriage' triangle due to Iran's empowerment. Nonetheless, by exploring the intervening variables, one can detect the gradual pace of the change from one triangle to another – related to how leaders perceived the status quo, interpreted regime identities, and assessed policy actions. I argue that the US's and Iran's decisions in the region eventually pushed Saudi Arabia to become dissatisfied with the status quo's precarious protection. Thus, Riyadh expanded its ambitions, assuming a proactive role that rivaled Iran and echoed the monarchy's dissatisfaction with the United States. This new motivation was possible due to Saudi Arabia's own empowerment after 2003. By the end of the period, its new regional power ambition, conservative and Arabic-centered, becomes evident.

The intervening variables have shown that the 2003-2014 triangle developed progressively. The two tendencies that define the period – the Iran nuclear impasse and Saudi Arabia's growing regional proactivity – were not an immediate consequence of the 2003 Iraqi invasion. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran attempted to maintain the previous coexistence and cooperative spirit from the détente despite having different gains with the Iraqi war. However, a divergence between how they perceived the environmental restrictiveness led to Saudi

Arabia's strategic recalculation at the costs of the *détente*. Simultaneously, Iran's growing regional empowerment did not provoke an automatic confrontation with the United States. Instead, the clash between the two over nuclear negotiations evolved gradually throughout the period due to a combination of elements that each country's intervening variables assessed differently, leading to suspicion and zero-sum rhetoric.

Immediately after the Iraqi invasion, Tehran was aware that it might be the next target and sent appeasement signals to Washington. While the Iranian 'grand bargain' indicated Iran's willingness to discuss the nuclear deal openly, the Bush administration chose to show no interest (Hiro 2018, p. 191). The neoconservative lenses inputted an idea that negotiating with Iran was an unnecessary compromise of the US values. Reportedly, VP Cheney replied, 'we don't talk to evil' (Javedanfar 2009). It is possible to affirm that the Bush administration's rhetoric enhanced Iran's neoconservatism at the reformists' cost. Ahmadinejad's election cannot be dissociated from Khatami's failure vis-à-vis American neoconservatism.

'Iranians prove they can't deal with us, and we prove that we can't deal with the Iranians, and as a result, nothing happens, but the factions in either of these countries who really would like to see more open political relations between them tend to get drowned out in the noise of the hardliners on both sides touting their particular views.' (PBS Frontline October 2007)

From 2005 to 2009, the two neoconservative ideologies were in power simultaneously in Iran and the United States, escalating antagonism and hostile tone. As an aspiring regional power and a revisionist actor, Iran was preoccupied with instability on its western flank and viewed the US permanence in Iraq as a unilateral abuse of power (Juneau 2015, pp. 112–113). The civil war in Iraq became an opportunity for Iran to project its influence, promote revisionist thinking, oppose US presence, and support like-minded groups. They often juxtaposed their 'natural role' as a regional power with the superficial US role. In Ahmadinejad's words, 'as long as the US remains in the region, it is a foreign object that people in the region will repel. Iran, however, cannot be repelled because it is part of the region and is here to stay' (interview with Keynoush 2016, p. 197). Conversely, the Bush administration claimed their purpose was to spread democracy worldwide, insisting that 'all options were on the table' concerning curbing Iran or Iraq's expansion (Black 2010).

In its turn, Saudi Arabia advised against the US decision to invade Iraq from the start. While Saddam's departure was positive, they were aware that it would empower Iran at the expense of Riyadh's traditional balancing strategy, restricting its environment. The status

satisfaction and the regime identity variables indicate that Saudi Arabia invariably links regional instability with regime threat. The FPE variable revealed that they were worried about Iran's empowerment, regional influence, and hegemonic ambitions. In addition, Saudis were concerned that the Iraqi Baath Party's dismantlement and the Shia political strengthening would have regional spillovers, creating a problem between the kingdom and its own Shia minority (Keynoush 2016, p. 176).

Nevertheless, Abdullah was aware that he had few options available in Iraq, as both the United States and Iran sought democratization, which meant Shia empowerment. Riyadh hoped to trade its acceptance of a stronger Iranian role in Iraq for the ex-Baathist groups' participation in power-sharing (Keynoush 2016, p. 178). However, both Washington and Tehran repeatedly ignored Riyadh's requests, reducing its status satisfaction. After the civil war broke down, Saudi Arabia urged a three-way dialogue, but Iran and the United States rejected it. Keynoush (2016, p. 199) argues that the regional system would have profited from Saudi Arabia's constructive role in Iraq in the long term. However, Riyadh was in a weak position to negotiate, tarnished by its subscription to the Shia crescent discourse and the frequent reports of Saudi citizens joining and financing Sunni terrorism.

I argue that excluding the Saudis from the Iraqi conflict was the first strike for the Saudi FPE to abandon rapprochement with Iran and seek regional leadership. It did not help that Ahmadinejad was in power, whom the Saudis saw a return to Khomeinism. Yet, from 2005 to 2006, both countries maintained the *détente* discourse. Ahmadinejad visited Saudi Arabia four times, and both he and Khamenei often stated that a friendship with the Saudis was a priority (Al Toraifi 2012, p. 241). Khamenei sent a series of letters while the government arranged ministerial exchanges to Riyadh to improve dialogue. However, the GCC countries grew skeptical about the nuclear program's aims and concerned about interference in Iraq and Lebanon. In 2007, the king advised Tehran to be careful and observe limits in its dealings with outside powers (Dawn 2007).

The second strike was Iran's growing involvement in Arab politics after the Lebanese 2006 war. Iran and Saudi Arabia even tried to work together in early 2007 to solve tensions among the different Lebanese groups they supported (Gause 2014, p. 16). However, in 2008, Hezbollah took over downtown Beirut, and Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for being behind the group's empowerment (Aarts and van Duijne 2009, p. 70). In response, Riyadh boosted its

support to Lebanese Salafi factions. Thus, perceiving the Iranian interference in Arabian affairs as unprecedented, Abdullah gradually employed sectarian lenses to tackle the issue, stating that ‘Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters’ (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2009b). His goal was to equate Iran as an external actor interfering in Arab politics while pushing Saudi Arabia as an Arab-centered leadership alternative.

The third strike for the Saudis was Iran’s nuclear program. In February 2006, the IAEA reported Iran for its non-compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In July, Tehran rejected UNSC Resolution 1696, which demanded the suspension of uranium enrichment activities. For Riyadh, if Iran managed to achieve enrichment, it would be on its way to regional supremacy. They were not necessarily worried about the nuclear program *per se*, but what would that mean regarding regional dominance. Thus, Abdullah, refocusing his regionalism preferences, promoted Saudi Arabia as the bastion of moderate Arabs, who aimed to maintain a nuclear-free Persian Gulf. In other words, he contrasted Saudi Arabia’s moderation with Iran’s radical tendencies via the framing that the nuclear empowerment sought regional hegemony. As Gause (2014, p. 13) puts it, Riyadh decided that no other country was prepared to counterweight Iranian influence in the Arab world, so they would have to ‘do the job themselves.’

That links to a parallel fourth strike, which was Saudi Arabia’s perception that the United States was no longer willing to guarantee regional order as before. Obama was a realist-internationalist president who perceived the liberal model as exportable but not imposable. Moreover, he seemed aware of the indispensable actor’s limitations, aiming to reduce international obligations to privilege national interests. Thus, he proposed a reevaluation of the Iranian approach, challenging the idea that the United States could not have working relations with the Islamic Republic. However, these signals did not resonate with the Iranian leadership before Rouhani’s election. Explanations for such silence stemmed not only from Ahmadinejad's preferences but also from the June 2009 presidential elections, which tarnished Iran’s international image. Simultaneously, domestic tensions intensified after 2009, taking priority over foreign policy.

Obama’s strategy towards Iran was dual track: offering first carrots, while sticks could follow. Tehran received a notice that it had until September to demonstrate its willingness to negotiate or new sanctions would be imposed (El-Khawas 2011, p. 95). As Ahmadinejad rejected negotiations, Obama shifted to the pressure track by the end of 2009 (Akbarzadeh and

Conduit 2016, p. 46). The dual-track strategy succeeded in gathering international support for tougher sanctions and covered actions. In June 2010, the UNSC 1929 resolution had ‘more of a bite,’ forbidding arm sales and imposing harsh controls on oil sector investment (Seliktar 2012, pp. 170–171). The US Congress passed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act in the same month, targeting foreign investments. In 2012, a more severe blow came when Iranian banks were disconnected from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication), damaging their ability to conduct trade (Hiro 2018, p. 264).

Rouhani’s election altered the FPE variable, tilting Iranian policies back to pragmatism, independentism, and international rehabilitation. Status dissatisfaction still informed Rouhani and these enrichment capabilities are a tool for reducing the status dissonance. However, unlike Ahmadinejad, Rouhani saw the environment as restrictive for extreme anti-imperialist discourse and believed isolation endangered Iran’s power. Moreover, he had support within Iranian factions, allowing him to head-start negotiations. After assuming the presidency, things moved quickly. Secret American-Iranian talks picked up early in August 2013. In October, Rouhani offered ‘time-bound and results-oriented talks’ over the nuclear question and spoke with Obama on the phone. Right afterward, Javad Zarif and John Kerry met at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The P5+1 talks resumed in early November in Geneva and, after five days of negotiation, the group announced the Geneva Interim Agreement, or the Joint Plan of Action, which opened the path to the JCPOA signature, adopted on October 8th, 2015 and implemented on January 16th, 2016.⁵⁰ It was the first deal signed by Washington and Tehran since the 1979.

Nevertheless, many international actors criticized the agreement for not having the ambition to coerce Iran’s regional behavior. Traditional US partners, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, saw it as an international consent to Iran’s growing interventionist behavior. Already in 2009, Saudi Arabia informed the United States that they were ‘okay with nuclear electric power and desalination, but not with enrichment’ as ‘they [Iran] do not need it!’ (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2009a). In their view, Iran ‘could not be trusted’ due to hegemonic ambitions (Saudi Arabia Embassy 2009b). Thus, the choice to sign a nuclear deal without previously informing Riyadh was perceived as a betrayal of trust. According to Bahgat and Sharp (2014, p. 31), despite

⁵⁰ The deal established that all uranium enriched beyond 5 percent would be diluted, no new uranium at the 3.5 percent enrichment level would be added, 50 percent of the centrifuges at Natanz and 75 percent at Fordow would be left inoperable. Besides, Iran would allow IAEA inspectors daily access to plants and grant access to uranium mines and centrifuge production facilities. In return, Iran would receive sanctions relief of approximately US\$7 billion, and no further sanctions would be imposed (Hiro 2018, p. 267).

Obama attempts to assure the Saudi counterparts that their partnership continued solid, there was an apparent trust deficit. Prince Turki al-Faisal asked, 'how can you build trust when you keep secrets from what are supposed to be your closest allies?' (Karasik 2/3/2014). With the prospect of easing tensions between Iran and the United States, Riyadh's mood dimmed.

For Saudi Arabia, Obama's behavior in the Middle East was erratic and indicated an abandonment of the Carter Doctrine. They view the nuclear agreement as evidence that the United States was ready to reckon with Iran's regional indispensability. The administration's reticence towards the Syrian conflict and its unwillingness to protect traditional allies from mass protests was yet another signal that the extra-regional power was not protecting the order. That is not to say that the United States and Saudi Arabia relations were tainted, but there was much more open criticism. According to Riedel (2018, p. 162), some Saudis said Washington treated its allies 'like it treated the Shah when he was deposed,' and Riyadh sent messages advising the United States to 'listen to its friends.' The US-Saudi side of the triangle was not becoming negative but permitting more independent action from the Saudi part.

The intervening variables reveal that the Saudi foreign policy's gradual evolution interlinks with the US's and Iran's regional policies. While the Iraq invasion created the conditions for Saudi Arabia to develop a new regional strategy, it was a concomitant series of events that drove it to aspire to a regional leadership position that checked Iran's power in the Persian Gulf. Unlike authors that say that Saudi Arabia and Iran returned to the 1980s rivalry after 2003, I argue that the rivalry seen since 2007 is a new phenomenon because it includes direct competition via regional proxies. From 1969 to 1979, Saudi Arabia had a secondary role in guaranteeing the conservative order with Iran. From 1979 to 2003, Saudi Arabia resigned to a strategy of balancing Iran or Iraq under the US security umbrella, competing with Iran religious matters. The US's decision to invade Iraq dismissed the monarchy's traditional strategy, forcing it to find alternatives. Meanwhile, Iran's empowerment and the US frustrating administrations drove Abdullah to invest in security and abandon the *détente* to guarantee his country's cruciality in the regional political game.

Initially describing Iran as a Persian foreign nation to differentiate it from the rest of the region, Saudi Arabia gradually stepped up towards the Shia vs. Sunni narrative to justify its opposition to Arab groups connected to Iran in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. For the first time, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Bahrain and Yemen under the pretext of protecting Sunni

regimes from Iranian interference. In March 2011, against the US's advice for caution, Riyadh sent more than a thousand troops to Bahrain to defend the Al Khalifa dynasty against what they saw as Shia protesters incited by Tehran. According to Riedel (2018, p. 159), Abdullah communicated to Obama that 'if the United States interfered in Bahrain, it would provoke a rupture in Saudi-American relations.'

In Yemen, Saudi Arabia pushed for a political transition in 2011 and steadily grew its influence to fight against the Houthis, whom Saudis saw as Iranian proxies. That drove the Saudi's Operation Decisive Storm in 2015, initiating the war in Yemen that continued until this thesis is written. By the end of the selected period, Saudi Arabia's new ambitions were out in the open. Riyadh sought to affirm its regional prominence, driven by the need to keep the Persian Gulf secure, in a context of escalating Iranian threat and the US perceived neglect. In conclusion, the construction of its narrative as a regional power cannot be dissociated from Iran and the United States.

7.6 Conclusions

From 2003 until 2014, Iran saw opportunities in Iraq, whereas Saudi Arabia was forced to find a new grand strategy as the US invasion wrecked its traditional preference. This triangle stressed the importance of analyzing power as fluctuant by breaking down its elements. The moment that Saddam's regime fell, the three actors increased in power. The United States expanded its military presence in the region to unforeseeable levels and boosted security ties with the GCC. Iran's set of alliances and influence boosted in tandem with the enfranchisement of Shia groups in the Middle East. In its turn, Saudi Arabia was relieved to see Saddam go. The rise of oil prices in the first half of 2000 also served Iran and Saudi Arabia to enhance their economy and increment military capacities. However, by 2008, Americans showed signs of war fatigue, interested in withdrawing from the region, while growing sanctions halted the Iranian empowerment moment. Only Saudi Arabia retained a steady growth and arrived at the end of the period with more power than it started.

While the balance of power explains the triangle change from a 'romantic triangle' to a 'stable marriage' (US-Saudi relations positive, US-Iran and Saudi-Iran relations negative), it does not reveal the specific events that drove Saudi Arabia to assume a regional power ambition. In triangles two and three, Saudi Arabia had competed with Iran for Islamic leadership but did not promote itself as a regional power. Its grand strategy has been since 1969 to take time to

evaluate, after a systemic change, if Iran or Iraq was more threatening to the regional stability. The US decision to invade Iraq set in motion a reassessment process in Saudi Arabia directly related to how Washington and Tehran were behaving in the region – reaffirming, once again, the structure of the strategic triangle.

Iranian presidents throughout the selection varied on how they perceived the environment. For Khatami, the system was restrictive due to the US presence and the possibility of becoming the next War on Terror target. That demanded the employment of pragmatism. For Ahmadinejad, the enfranchisement of revisionist groups, the ties with Iraq, and the widespread anti-Americanism gave Iran leverage to return to the ideological promotion of the revolutionary ideals. That increased Saudi Arabia's perception that Iran was becoming the primary source of regional instability. As Ahmadinejad used the country's nuclear capability as a tool to criticize Western hegemony, Abdullah changed his position and started to defend a nuclear-free Persian Gulf. While not abandoning his ambitions for creating an endogenous regional system, he started to frame Saudi Arabia as the representant of the 'moderate Arabs' in opposition to Iran, the 'factor' behind the mounting instability.

While Iran's empowerment explains the détente's discontinuance, Saudi Arabia's new ambition for regional leadership must also account for the US role. The status variable showed how Riyadh was getting discontent with Washington's commitment to protecting the order. Bush's decision to invade Iraq represented an abandonment of the Carter Doctrine and, while Obama returned to that policy, his insistence on burden-sharing and rehabilitating Iran made the Saudi's doubt the US's reliability. Riyadh's anxiety with the regional order only increased with Obama's decision not to support traditional partners during the Arab Uprisings. As the FPE variable discussed, Obama's assessment of US power limitations pushed him away from conflicts that did not reflect direct national interests. The appraisal of all these aspects specified the new Saudi Arabia ambition: proactively guaranteeing the order. Like the Iranian status ambition in the Shah's time, Riyadh is not a revisionist actor as it wants only to improve its position in the same status quo – it seeks a promotion.

A closer analysis of the FPE is also necessary for understanding how the nuclear negotiations came to be when they did and not any other period. This selection covers one of the most aggressive wars on words between Iran and the United States, as well as the first time both signed an agreement. The definition of terrorism as the main enemy gave the United States

the ontological security it was missing on the last triangle. For Bush, a neoconservative oriented by internationalist-nationalist lenses, Iran could not have nuclear power because it supported terrorism and rejected liberal democracy. Ahmadinejad intertwined nuclear power with national pride and accused the West of nuclear colonialism. Both saw their countries' empowerment as a sign that the environment was open to vindictive behaviors.

Conversely, Obama, a realist-progressive, believed it was necessary to acknowledge Iran's power in the region and coerce it into a regional security system that benefited US interests. For the first time, the United States did not demand preconditions for negotiation, avoiding Clinton's and George H. W. Bush's problem of not approaching Tehran through mutual respect. Also, by encouraging regional partners to share the burden, Obama indicated certain discontent with their reliance on Washington for security, which was not in line with his preferred realist grand strategy. Concomitantly, Rouhani was elected under the promise to fix the nuclear situation and end international sanctions, seen as the primary source of social-economic distress. He had an acute sense of environment restrictiveness, returning to the pragmatic cognitive lenses. Moreover, he had the support of the conservatives and Khamenei to start negotiations. Therefore, a series of factors aligned to reduce tensions over the nuclear program during these presidencies. It was the first time both FPEs were interested in improving ties while facing few domestic barriers.

Nevertheless, Obama's failure to assess Saudi Arabia's dissatisfaction with the status quo while reaching out to Iran led to increased anxieties in the Arab nation, which responded with proactivity, sectarianism, and militarization. Saudi Arabia's new role is in direct competition with Iran for regional leadership. It is also more independent from the United States while in line with the Western interests in guaranteeing security, order, and routine oil markets. By the time ISIS became the central issue in the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia found themselves in a unique rivalry scenario, supporting different groups in many regional countries.

The 2014 conflict against ISIS, which drove Iran and the United States to deploy troops to Iraq, is another structural change that opened space for the emergence of a new, still in development, triangle. Soon after, the right-wing republican President Donald Trump (2017-2021) took advantage of this scenario to revise Obama's diplomatic gains with Iran and spike US-Iran tensions. At the same time, an emerging powerful Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman (2015-), is determined to promote Saudi Arabia as the new US surrogate regional power

in the Persian Gulf, rivaling directing with Iran and pushing for a less asymmetrical alliance between Washington and Riyadh.

8. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the question: can the relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia be understood as a triangular relationship? If yes, how so? What are the characteristics of this triangulation? Which types of strategic triangles these actors had already shared, and how can one analyze them? Exploring a considerable period (from 1969 to 2014), I concluded that the complexity of the relationship is better grasped through the analytical construct of a strategic triangle, in which each dyad is highly interlinked with the other two

dyads. To reach this conclusion, I presented six analytical chapters, confining the triangle to the Persian Gulf regional system, and applied an NCR approach as an explanative tool. In this final chapter, I first return to the triangle's construction, reviewing the steps taken for building the analytical instrument and how the four study cases were defined. Then, I bring the main conclusions reached in the empirical chapters, discussing the four triangles in parallel and stressing their tendencies. The following sections highlight the empirical and theoretical findings of the thesis. Afterward, I present the many paths this research can move forward, discussing its further applicability as well as some key limitations. Finally, I contextualize the fifth ongoing triangle, stating the importance of applying the thesis' framework from 2014 onwards. On the last page, I provide some final remarks.

8.1 Constructing the triangle

This thesis began with Dittmer's concept of a strategic triangle to outline how the relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia could be framed as such. However, I stripped away this concept from theoretical meaning to work as an analytical construct designed to generate hypotheses and stimulate more systematic thinking about complex relational patterns. In other words, I used Dittmer's typology for the construction of the thesis' model without any theoretical or conceptual predefinitions. I assumed a strategic triangle as a complex relational arrangement that includes three countries that share highly interconnected international politics. To be a strategic triangle, each of the three actors must (i) acknowledge that the other two are crucial geopolitical actors, (ii) recognized the other two as autonomous, sovereign players, and (iii) elaborate their policy or strategies with awareness to each other. In other words, each of the three dyads within the triangle (the bilateral relationships) is liable to the other two, meaning that a change in one 'side' of the triangle can alter the other two.

Chapter three reviewed the preferred theoretical approaches used in International Relations of the Middle East (IRME) to explore politics in the region. It became clear that the Middle East defies the extremes of parsimony or particularism. On the one hand, theories that see the region like any other fall short for not considering specific elements such as identity, religion, and transnational ideologies. On the other hand, models considering those domestic elements as the primary sources of international relations tend to ignore that the Middle East is composed of states inserted in a division of power that defines much of how they can relate. In

general, Neorealism and Constructivism, the two most frequent IR paradigms used in IRME, have shown themselves insufficient to grasp the region's complexity alone.

Today, the most influential IRME works apply an eclectic combination of theories and concepts to better cope with regional particularities without abandoning structural awareness. These analytical eclecticists seek different combinations of domestic elements in tandem with an anarchical understanding of the system to find a middle ground between agency and structure. They offer many paths for a Realist course correction, emphasizing the overbearing effect of the structure on international relations while opening the state's black box to explore how intention, identity, leadership, ideology, and transnationalism affect motivations and interests in the Middle East. However, while they provide compelling explanations about real phenomena, their added value to the discipline is blurry. IRME analytical eclecticism has only tangentially contributed to theory-building and testing, maintaining, inadvertently or not, the region on the periphery of the IR's knowledge production.

This thesis offered a soft positivist understanding of science, arguing that theories should aim at providing explanatory richness, theoretical cumulation, and consistent research programs, building scholarly communities with shared research interests, methodologies, and interpretations of reality. Unfortunately, IRME analytical eclecticism, arbitrarily patchworking theories in isolation and avoiding comparisons, has not yet formed a cohesive IR body of literature, often risking degeneration, over-determination, and disciplinary ostracization. Considering that they offer compelling arguments for why the Middle East demands a theoretical framework that combines unit and structural elements, I approached the strategic triangle via Neoclassical Realism (NCR). I argued that NCR, a pluralist theory, has the needed paradigmatic boundaries to stand midway between systemic determinism and unit-level determinism, dodging the extremes of parsimony and particularism. That allows for research with similar diagnostic precision and political relevancy to analytical eclecticism, while it does not lose theoretical accumulation or methodological rigor.

Neoclassical Realism sustains that international policy is driven first and foremost by a country's place in the systemic distribution of power but, to explain why and how states deliberate policies, it is necessary to investigate internal variables. In other words, the international system creates conditions but does not have complete control over the outcomes. Characteristics of a state filter and redirect inputs from the structure, intervening in the outcome.

These elements do not cause foreign policy, grand strategy, or systemic change, but they alter the decision-making process of international relations. For an NCR framework to be effective, selecting these intervening variables must be based on a priori investigation based on empirical grounds, frequently dialoguing with other disciplines and area studies specialized in the subject. For this reason, chapter two explored the specialized literature on the three dyads that compose the triangulation. The review of the bilateral relations (US-Iran; US-Saudi Arabia; Saudi Arabia-Iran) stressed which elements scholars have often stressed as crucial to grasp the topic. For the three cases, issues of *ideologies*, political *identities*, and *leadership* are essential. Thus, these factors were operationalized in chapter three to build up the thesis' analytical instrument.

Chapter two also provided a contextualization of the regional system in which the triangulation plays out. The Persian Gulf is a system within the Middle East constituted by seven independent actors that shared securitarian concerns. This system was formed in 1970 when the British dropped its imperial pretensions, and the Trucial States became independent. Since then, the local interrelations are enough to define the region as a system penetrated by foreign actors' interests, embedded in the international power balance and dependent on the capitalist global economy. Four characteristics define this system: the political role of religion, oil resources, high militarization, and the US presence and interference. Most importantly, it has been since its formation multipolar, in the sense that no regional actor had managed to become a hegemon. Nevertheless, the high level of militarization meant that conflicts permeated the region, frequently altering the configuration of the balance of power.

The review detected five moments in which the balance of power has changed: (i) the UK withdraw in 1970, (ii) the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the consequent Iran-Iraq war, (iii) the 1990 Gulf War, (iv) the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and (v) the 2014 Islamic State's offensive in Mosul. Considering that NCR postulates that independent variables are alterations in power, I assumed these four events as structural changes that provoked power adjustment, igniting change within the US-Iran-Saudi Arabia triangle. That means these events delimited my case studies. I do not offer a study case for the period after 2014 as I take that this triangulation is still ongoing, making it impossible to analyze at the same comparative and empirical level as the other four.

Thus, after defining the study cases (1970-1979; 1979-1990; 1990-2003; 2003-2104), it is possible to draw hypotheses based on Dittmer's categorization of strategic triangles. Thus, I

outlined four hypothetical triangles: (i) a '*ménage à trois*' (1970-1979), in which the three countries shared positive, working relations; (ii) a '*stable marriage*' (1979-1990), in which Saudi Arabia and the United States improved their ties while worsening relations with Iran; (iii) a '*romantic triangle*' (1990-2003), in which Saudi Arabia had positive ties with the United States and Iran while these two negative relations remained, and (iv) a return to the '*stable marriage*' (2003-2014), in which Saudi Arabia and the United States kept the constructive ties while deteriorating relations with Iran.

To confirm these hypotheses, each study case is investigated through process tracing and content analysis. The data collection was primarily qualitative, amounting to speeches, official governmental documents, intradepartmental communications, cables, and critical use of specialized literature. NCR predefines a hierarchical arrangement for its variables: unit-level variables (intervening variables) are sub-sequential to systemic-level variables (the independent variables). In other words, power first defines the perimeter of options for state agency, and unit-level factors contour the outcome (dependent variable). In my model, I applied the following explanative chain to the four case studies: *power* (independent variable) → *status satisfaction, regime identity, foreign policy executives* (dependent variable) → *the triangle* (dependent variable).

Each of the three intervening variables served to specify the range of feasible grand strategy available by explaining a particular aspect of the decision-making process. First, status satisfaction relates to ideational factors shaping international politics, *shifting* the grand strategy parameters towards revisionism or continuity. Second, regime identity accounts for cognitive elements influencing the process, *narrowing* the band of possible action. Finally, the FPE conveys leadership issues, *tilting* the outcomes to the direction of their preferences, interests, and interpretations. In each study case, the dependent variable was the strategic triangle. I described its main characteristics and tendencies during the period, exploring which elements become apparent only through the intervening variables. The following section focuses on these results, reviewing and comparing the four strategic triangles.

8.2 The strategic triangle of the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf strategic triangle comprises three dyads (bilateral relations) with a very asymmetrical distribution of power among the actors. While Iran's power fluctuated throughout these forty-five years, the Saudi Arabian and the US' power projection in the region steadily

increased – for the last actor at a much fast pace. While Saudi Arabia and Iran can be classified as regional power contenders today, the United States is a staunch extra-regional power that outweighs local actors. The nature of the dyads also diverges mostly. While the United States began relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia due to energy interests, the US-Saudi relations progressively evolved to a long-standing oil-for-security tie. In contrast, the US-Iran quickly shifted from an alliance to an enmity that has been relentless. Conversely, while Iran and Saudi Arabia never had a natural inclination towards friendship, their ties had shifted from partnership, hostility, coexistence, and rivalry accordingly to the convergence or divergence of their national interests and motivations.

The thesis revealed that the strategic triangle began when the British announced their withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, being officialized by the Twin Pillar Diplomacy, which aimed to conflate the three countries' national interests. However, a strategic triangle does not need to be officialized as such to be considered one. As the results confirmed, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States have shared three other triangular relations. The interconnectivity degree between the dyads determines if a relationship is a strategic triangle or three separate relations: actor A must be aware of actor B's and C's behavior when elaborating its own preferred approach to guarantee national interests. That is why an effective way to detect the interaction was assessing their grand strategy together during the selected periods, detecting highly interconnected policy tendencies.

In the *first triangle (1970-1979)*, the assessment of power showed that the Persian Gulf was a multipolar system in which Iran had a considerable possibility of becoming a regional power due to its size, population, and strategic position. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, still consolidating its regime, had intrinsic vulnerabilities that did not allow it to compete with Iran or Iraq. Nevertheless, due to its Arabic and Islamic credentials, Riyadh had much more changeable power than Washington or Tehran. This factor was recognized in the elaboration of the Twin Pillar Diplomacy, a strategy suiting the Nixon Doctrine, which expected to reduce the US commitments in the Third World. Both King Faisal and Shah Pahlavi identified this strategy as an opportunity and worked to improve Saudi-Iran ties, boosting their power and status as critical Western partners.

While Saudi Arabia was suspicious about Iran's ambitions for regional supremacy, the triangle structure guaranteed them an anxiety easement. Tehran's purpose was to assume the

UK's position as a surrogate for the Western interests in the region, protecting the order from any instability or ideological threat. The Saudis expected the Twin Pillar structure to check Iraq's regional threat while keeping Iran under control. Despite different regime identities, the three actors managed to work in a collaborative scenario because (i) they did not compete for status, (ii) they shared the threat perception concerning communism and Iraq, and (iii) they had pragmatic leaders capable of taking advantage of the environment permissiveness. Hence, the tendency during this triangle was an orchestration for maintaining the conservative regional order.

During the *second triangle (1979-1990)*, the revolution reduced Iran's economic and military power, as well as affected its demography, set of alliances, and regional appeal. Moreover, Iran's new revisionist ambitions enhanced Saudi Arabia's and the US's anxiety towards the regional order, pushing the two to consolidate their oil-for-security partnership. Perceiving its interests in the region were threatened, the United States boosted its power projection by creating the CENTCOM, establishing security ties with the monarchies, and announcing the Carter Doctrine. In parallel, Saudi Arabia, the only remaining pillar of the previous strategy, founded the GCC, coordinating the interest of the remaining conservative actors and facilitating the implementation of the Carter Doctrine.

As Iranians got politically isolated, the US-Saudi partnership strengthened. These two tendencies exposed the high interlinked relations within the triangle. By becoming a revisionist actor, Iran challenged the region's Western orientation, increasing general anxiety within the triangle. Iran's Islamist and anti-imperialist identity helped push the country away from Saudi Arabia, which eventually assessed that Iraq was less of a threat to the order and the monarchy. With the hostage crisis, the US leadership created an international consensus that framed Iran as an irrational actor against liberal values. Hence, not only did the three actors had different regime identities, but also there was cognitive antagonism between them. This way, the space for political maneuver became very scarce as (i) Iran disagreed with the other two about ideal regional order, (ii) Saudi Arabia and the United States agreed that Iran was the biggest threat, (iii) non-pragmatic leaders such as Khomeini and Reagan rejected the possibility of accommodation. In less than a decade, the US-Iranian enmity was laid out.

The *third triangle (1990-2003)* showed how the 1990 Gulf War worked as a window of opportunity to mitigate the relations within the triangle. The period represented the unipolar

moment for the United States, with unmatched economic and diplomatic expansion. After showcasing its outstanding military superiority by defeating Saddam, the United States maintained its troops, consolidating itself as an extra-regional power. That reassured Saudi Arabia that Washington would keep its position of order protector despite the bipolarity's end. Additionally, while Riyadh's power improved in relation to Iran and Iraq, the decade of low oil prices took a toll on the three local actors, who found themselves in financial distress. That was particularly the case for Iran, which, after almost a decade of war isolation, found itself in need to attract investments. Thus, while its revisionist ambitions were not abandoned, the regime turned towards pragmatism, enabling Iranian leaders to lessen the 'export the revolution' discourse in favor of a more constructive regional behavior.

The maintenance of the Carter Doctrine, Saddam's quick defeat, and Iran's willingness to integrate into the international community allowed the formation of the Saudi-Iranian détente, the third triangle's first tendency. Crown Prince Abdullah and Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami saw benefits in improving ties to work together at OPEC and seek a more endogenous regional arrangement. Interestingly, while Saudi Arabia saw the system as less restrictive and its order anxiety was lower, Iran sought cooperation particularly because it saw the environment as restrictive for revisionist policies, mainly with the US troops remaining. Pragmatism also pushed the Iranian presidents to reach out to the United States, seeking appeasement. Presidents George W.H. Bush and Clinton also showed signals in favor of a rapprochement, but domestic constraints in both countries resulted in a sequence of failed attempts – the triangle's second tendency. Finally, I argued that for the Saudi-Iranian détente to continue evolving after the 9/11 attacks, it would be necessary for the US-Iranian ties to improve due to the environment's restrictiveness. Again, that confirmed the existence of triangulation, this time a 'romantic triangle,' where one pivot actor balances working ties with other two that do not share positive ties.

The final *fourth triangle (2003-2014)* began with the empowerment of the three actors after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The United States increased its power projection after deploying more forces to the region, whereas both Saudi Arabia and Iran were relieved to see a foe leave the political scene. In addition, the 2004 oil price boom translated into more investment and economic improvement in both regional countries. However, while sanctions and mismanagement drove Tehran to economic distress by the second half of the period, Riyadh

kept a steady growth throughout the selection, especially after the Arab Uprisings. This empowerment enabled Saudi Arabia to orchestrate a new ambition to face its mounting anxiety towards the regional order. By the end of the period, Saudi Arabia started projecting itself as a regional leader – a conservative, Sunni, Arab leader – in opposition to Iran.

For the first time, Iran and Saudi Arabia competed for regional leadership, and that is closely related to the US role in the region. On the one hand, President Ahmadinejad saw the increased anti-Americanism after the Iraqi invasion as a tool to push for more revisionist policies. He returned to an ideological identity, linking anti-imperialist sentiments with nationalism and resistance. That rhetoric, together with the nuclear empowerment, poured the final cold water on the Saudi-Iranian détente. In parallel, Saudi Arabia was growingly dissatisfied with the US's willingness to protect the order, particularly during the Obama term. Without harming the relations with Washington, Abdullah focused on more independent action, in which he could assist other Sunni actors, promote counter-revolutionary ideas, and check Iranian expansion without necessarily the US aval. Thus, this triangle's two tendencies, the Saudi Arabian projection as a regional leader and the Iranian nuclear negotiations, are interlinked, evidencing the triangulation.

So far, the triangulation only changed via conflicts that modified the balance of power and oriented the three actors to recalculate their strategies to the Persian Gulf. It is possible to speculate that if the JCPOA had managed to eliminate sanctions, attract foreign capital, and reinsert Iran in the global economy, Iran could have increased its power via a non-bellucose way to the point of changing the balance of power. However, that did not happen throughout the analysis or the six years since the deal was implemented. When it comes to patterns, the four triangles showed a high reliance on *perception* towards how the actors' behaviors within the triangles increase or reduce environment restrictiveness. Second, considering that the United States and Saudi Arabia are status quo actors and Iran, since 1979, is a revisionist one, and taking into account that the regional system continued multipolar, militarized, and zero-sum, the '*stable marriage*' is the most recurrent pattern.

After forty-five years of triangulation, it is possible to affirm that the US-Saudi Arabian dyad is positive and resilient, based on a pragmatic assessment of interests. Conversely, except for the first triangle, it is visible that the US-Iran dyad is negative and also resilient, permeated by cognitive schemas of hostility and enmity that are hard to change. Finally, the Saudi-Iran

dyad is the most fluctuant, being already classified as a conservative partnership, a religious competition, a cautious détente, or a hostile rivalry. Moreover, this dyad is constantly affected by the other two. In *triangle one*, Saudi-Iran relations improved to meet the Nixon Doctrine. In *triangle two*, they grew more distant at the same pace the United States cut ties with Iran and solidified a partnership with Saudi Arabia. In *triangle three*, Saudi-Iranian relations improved concerning how both perceived the environment restrictiveness related to the US power projection in the Persian Gulf. Finally, *triangle four* showed how Iran-Saudi emerging rivalry relates not only to how Riyadh perceived Tehran's and Washington's behavior in the region but also how the last two incipient closeness boosted the first's anxieties.

8.3 Empirical findings

The first finding relates to the Persian Gulf regional system. The thesis reiterated the four regional system characteristics that the literature traditionally stressed: highly militarized, permeated by transnational religious ideologies, intrinsically linked to global capitalist due to massive oil reserves, and marked by a persistent presence of the United States. However, I disagreed with the authors stating there has always been a Persian Gulf triangulation in which Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia competed for regional leadership. Throughout the thesis, I argued that this frame is misleading because (i) it assumes that Saudi Arabia has aimed at regional leadership since the 1970s, and (ii) it disregards the US' active role as an extra-regional player. While Iran and Iraq have projected themselves as possible candidates for regional leadership since the system's formation, this ambition is only detectable in Saudi Arabia in the fourth triangle. In its turn, the United States has been playing a part in regional politics since the Carter Doctrine via protecting order – a role that gradually consolidated for it a position of extra-regional power.

The second finding is that the US-Iran-Saudi triangle *is* the only Persian Gulf triangle. I argued that there had been a strategic triangulation between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States since the formation of the regional system, being, therefore, the *fifth regional system's characteristic*. That is because the Persian Gulf cannot be dissociated from its formation during the Cold War, as the securitarian preoccupations of the local countries were coupled with the West vs. East contest. Together with a renouncement of communism, these rent economies, which relied on the capitalist market, idealized a position of closeness with the West – the only exception being Iraq. When the United States was forced to develop a regional strategy as the

UK departure could create a power vacuum for the URSS, President Nixon's chosen strategy excluded Iraq from the equation. The subsequent Carter Doctrine kept excluding Iraq, and this thesis has shown that the US grand strategizing has always been linked with Iran's behavior and vice-versa. That explains why the analysis here is not about a Persian Gulf square (including Iraq) but a triangle – precisely because it excluded Iraq.

The affirmation that the triangular relationship is characteristic of the Persian Gulf does not mean the order is tripolar. A tripolarity would mean that three actors checking one another dominated the regional balance of power. However, the system has maintained itself without a hegemon throughout the period. In practical terms, the affirmation that the triangle is part of the system means that any discussion about regional order must be aware of how these dyads are interconnected and how a modification on one of them has spillover effects, wanted or unwanted. Finally, this thesis concludes that inflexible and set on the stone labels like the 'US-Saudi partnership,' 'Iran-Saudi rivalry,' or 'US-Iranian enmity' should be discarded in favor of more contextualized analysis. It raises awareness of the fact that their regional behaviors rely on a complex assessment of environment restrictiveness, ideational motivations, cognitive images, and leadership preferences.

The third finding relates to the status variable and how it showcases the actors' regional order preferences. The study explained that the United States and Saudi Arabia are status quo actors because they want to maintain the Persian Gulf as it is. Until the fourth triangle, both believed that multipolarity works for their interests, particularly to guarantee a regular oil flow to the capitalist economies. However, by the eve of the 2010s, I detected a status-seeking behavior in Saudi Arabia, in which it promotes itself as a regional leader. In its turn, Iran has been a revisionist actor for the whole analysis except on the first triangle. It is important to stress that status satisfaction concerns how a country's status aspiration matches its ascribed status. In the first triangle, Iran was a status quo actor because it perceived that the other members of its status community embraced its promotional, status-seeking behavior; thus, aspiration matched ascription. However, during the other periods, Iran's ambition for regional leadership and a more endogenous regional order did not match others' ascription. Thus, it is revisionist because it is dissatisfied with the ascribed status.

It is a no-brainer that Saudi Arabia and Iran diverge when it comes to the United States' role in the regional order. While Riyadh argues that an extra-regional power protects stability,

for Iran, the United States' presence is a constant source of threats and instabilities, preventing endogenous regionalism. The status variable also showed how anxiety plays a key role in policymaking, particularly for Saudi Arabia. Due to its conservative political ethos and a sense of mistrust towards local actors, Saudi Arabia is suspicious of any regional order change and tends to inflate threats. This anxiety has been mitigated when the United States openly involved the Saudis in their strategies, as seen in the Dual Twin Policy and the Carter Doctrine's implementation. On the other hand, excluding the Saudis from the decisions of invading Iraq or negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran resulted in an anxiety augmentation.

The regime identity variable presented another empirical finding regarding ideational identities. Independent of the time selection, the three countries promoted a self-image that had an ideological element. Due to its Islamic credentials, Saudi Arabia sees itself as a protector of Muslims worldwide, having the duty to safeguard, defend, and mitigate conflicts among the Islamic *ummah*. It is an ideational role because it promotes the idea that a Muslim status quo should define the region. The ideational element in the US' identity is grounded on a sense of exceptionalism, in which the American creed (individualism, capitalism, liberalism, democracy) is advertised as a superior political experience to be emulated. In its turn, Iran's regime identity was based on Iranianess during the Shah's period, an idea that Iran was exceptional due to its history and cultural preeminence, and, for that, it should be a natural regional leader. After the revolution, the Iranian identity's ideological connotation was linked to its anti-imperialist, pan-Islamic, and revolutionary prerogatives. Iran saw itself as a unique model of Islamic awakening against oppression that should instigate transformation everywhere.

An interesting finding concerns manicheist or dualistic identities. Both the post-1979 Iran and the United States have regime identities that thrive under the existence of a clear enemy or rival that they can oppose themselves to. Because they recognize a certain moral superiority and exceptional attribute for themselves, these countries have shown difficulty accommodating actors that disagree with what they stand for. That is why any negotiation between both actors needs to be cautiously calculated and gradual, or else they risk being rejected as a way to confirm cognitive markers. In practical terms, the more ideologically driven the leader is, the more difficulty he will have to reach out to the other, as it muddles coexistence within differences. That was primarily visible during the Bush-Ahmadinejad period but also in the many failed rapprochement attempts throughout the 1990s.

The final empirical finding concerns a relational pattern between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As already mentioned, this dyad changed the most throughout the analysis. However, whenever there is an intensification of hostilities or an attempt to ameliorate the ties, the *Hajj* is the chosen stage. The *Hajj* is a symbolic and performative experience shared by all Muslims, but it has also become a place for boundary-making or hostility intensification for Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, the second triangle showed that Khomeini encouraged Iranians to flaunt the revolution during the pilgrimage and, after a series of clashes between demonstrators and Saudi forces, Riyadh cut ties with Tehran in 1988. The third triangle demonstrated the inverse process: after indicating an intention to improve relations, Iran and Saudi Arabia's first move was to renegotiate quotas for the *Hajj* in 1991. In the same year, diplomatic ties were resumed. While it is out of this thesis's temporal scope, the same pattern is happening in the fifth triangle.

In short, this thesis presented empirical findings that contribute to questions about how we understand the regional system and its characteristics, how change within the dyads is more gradual than one might initially think, and which is the added value of ideational, cognitive, and leadership variables for understanding this complex relational set. As it became clear, the triangular framework exposed patterns that are otherwise hidden if one investigates the bilateral ties separately and presented much more nuance about the topic, offering higher explanative value about the regional order and the states' interaction.

8.4 Theoretical findings

The thesis concluded that it was highly productive to apply a Neoclassical Realist framework to grasp the relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia as a strategic triangle. NCR presented itself as an improvement from IRME's analytical eclecticism as it also seeks a middle ground between structure and agency, building analyses that consciously sacrifice parsimony for more explanative value. NCR offers more flexible paradigmatic boundaries than Neorealism, investigating political events as they are, not how they ought to be. Moreover, by determining that independent variables are systemic and intervening variables are unit-level, NCR offers explanative chains that are synthetical, hierarchical, and reproducible. This way, NCR overcomes much of the analytical eclecticism's pitfalls of degeneration and over-determination, proposing a pathway to strengthen the IRME's research program. The review in chapter two maintained that IRME's analytical eclecticism seeks for a Realist course correction. This thesis concluded that NCR is a rewarding roadmap.

I stated that applying NCR to this study would create a win-win-win scenario because it (i) create interdisciplinarity space for interaction between Middle East Studies and International Relations; (ii) bring the region to the forefront of IR center of knowledge production, reducing its isolation from theory building and conceptual constructions; and (iii) promote transformative dialogue between Realism and the knowledge produced in, from, or by the region, reducing the gap between the paradigm and the Global IR movement. First, area studies were crucial for defining the intervening variables and outlining the regional system. Second, the study deliberately avoided essentialist cultural discussions that would confine the analytical instrument to the Middle East, offering an IR theory about strategic triangles that can be applied to other regions and contribute to the discipline's progress. Third, the interface between NCR and IRME's practical knowledge compelled the historicization and contextualization of Realist concepts, an exercise that Global IR mainly welcomes. Thus, the thesis reaffirmed that NCR bridges the spatial (structure and state agency), cognitive (matters and ideas), and temporal (past and present), indicating a promising future for Neoclassical Realism in International Relations of the Middle East.

In general, the inclusion of contextualized power, status satisfaction, regime identity, and foreign policy executives confirmed the hypothesis that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States play the geopolitical game while being aware of their ideational motivations, cognitive orientations, and leadership preferences. First, by investigating *power* as a contextualized and divisible phenomenon throughout time, it became clear how dynamic, contingent, and multidimensional it is. One loses too much explanative value if it fixates only on military power or one specific date. Moreover, this approach has the added value of historicizing power, facilitating a more detailed and complex understanding of the many resources available to a state to induce politics in its favor. Moreover, by dividing power into stable (economy, geography, demography, military) and changeable (alliances, political ties, regional appeal, diplomatic liaisons), it became visible that an increase or a reduction of one element of power does not affect all resources and that these elements of power can variate among themselves. Therefore, the thesis made a case for discarding sole quantitative approaches to state power in favor of more complex, contextual analysis.

Status satisfaction works efficiently as the first intervening variable because it relates directly to the balance of power via perception. This variable has the value of showcasing a

country's international ambitions, which can go beyond state survival and involve non-material matters. I concluded that the status satisfaction variable provides a broader understanding of two critical issues for the Middle East: (i) anxiety and (ii) environment restrictiveness. The three states are constantly paying attention to power distribution to grasp how permissive the environment is for their ambitions. Status quo actors, such as Saudi Arabia and the United States, get anxious with the possibility of order disturbance, which orients their FPE to tilt policies towards protecting stability and checking revisionist actors or ideologies. Conversely, revisionist actors, such as Iran, get anxious when they perceive their environment is getting restrictive – such as when a rival increases power projection – which drives them to recalculate their ambitions, prioritizing self-reliance over revisionist rhetoric. This finding aligned with NCR premises: ideational motivations are only available when an actor realizes itself in a secure, open environment.

The *regime identity* variable investigated issues concerning a country's self-image, which ontologically differentiates what it is from what it is not. This variable revealed interesting findings about (i) the link between identity and motivations and (ii) the link between identity and leaders' agency. First, identities with an ideational connotation suggest that the *self* is linked with promoting a role to an external audience (the regional system, the Muslim community, the Western block, among others), creating motivations beyond regime survival. Moreover, ontological distress emerges when the *other* is not distinctive because there is no clear opposition or there is a remarkably similar new identity out there. This ontological confusion or insecurity triggers hypersensibility towards threat perception, affecting status satisfaction. In other words, identity explains some status ambitions and threat perceptions that cannot be clarified via materialist frameworks. While these variables have a different effect on the explanative chain (status tilts policies towards revisionism or status quo, identity filters out cognitively dissonant options), their analytical value is much increased when discussed in combination.

A key theoretical finding is that regime identity makes available cognitive lenses from which leaders can choose while deciding on international politics: Saudi Arabia has two lenses available (pan-Islamist or sectarian); the United States has four (internationalist, nationalist, progressivist, or realist); and the Islamic Republic of Iran has two (ideological or pragmatic). That provides a direct link between the *FPE* and its political preferences. Regime identities do

not restrict all presidents, kings, and leaders from submitting to one interpretation of their country's cognitive function or another. Instead, they offer available options that the FPE can choose based on their assessment of interests or political gains. Furthermore, according to their grasp of the environment, the FPE can switch from one lens to another without ontological distress. That corroborates the NCR's assumption that policy outcomes are ultimately bounded to decision-makers and how they calculate risks, interests, and opportunities. Moreover, the idea that a regime identity does not condition politics but serves as a tool for leaders to tackle ambiguous environments and threats corroborates the IRME analytical eclecticism's assessment of regional politics.

Finally, the thesis presented itself as an NCR type II analysis, as it investigated grand strategies. However, each of the triangles showed *relation tendencies* that marked the period and influenced regional politics. Considering that I covered forty-five years, it is possible to say that the thesis is also in the realm of NCR type III, exploring long-term systemic outcomes. That corroborated the idea that NCR's types concern case selection and temporality rather than methodology. Foreign policy (type I) is learned through time, becoming part of an effective grand strategy (type II) which, in its turn, by constantly interacting with other grand strategies, defines systemic outcomes (type III). Thus, this study has reaffirmed the assumption that NCR recognizes that the system is both productive and a product of interstate relations. This final finding is crucial for advancing some paradigmatic assumptions relating to agency and structure and how to historicize Realist concepts – thus, I make here a full circle and reiterate the win-win-win scenario I proposed initially.

8.5 Further applicability and limitations

This thesis brought new empirical and theoretical knowledge that contributes to ongoing discussions in International Relations, such as questions about ontological security and threat perception, grand strategy assessment, and the link between agency and structure. When it comes to regional studies, I presented the strategic triangle as a Persian Gulf's characteristic, which can set in motion a series of analysis about how it affects the international politics of other regional actors, as well as its many spillover effects – wanted or unwanted – over the order. I stressed the importance of conflictive order preferences, a topic that can be broadened by considering other actors' preferences. Which are the Iraqi, Qatari, Emirati, and Bahraini regional order preferences? Do they converge with any of those promoted by the triangle's actors, or are

other alternatives being discussed? Most importantly, do other regional actors recognize the existence of this triangulation when they are assessing their strategies and policies? The research program of regional order(s) seems to be key for tackling issues of alliance-making, conflict escalation, proxy-client relations, and security dilemmas – all fundamental issues for IRME and its continued progress.

Moreover, the thesis invites IRME scholars to include the United States in their analysis as an extra-regional actor with active participation. That opens many questions about the role of an extra-regional actor in a regional system. It is clear that their security is not as dependent on the regional arrangement of those that are local. However, a limitation in this study is to develop indicators that can contribute to the construction of a well-defined concept of extraterritoriality participation in these systems. Furthermore, while the focus on the Persian Gulf is justified theoretically and for its feasibility, it is essential to remember that the Persian Gulf is a system within the Middle East. The model would be improved if explored in the broader context of the region, assessing how actors such as Turkey, Israel, and Lebanon play within this dynamic adjacently. The Israeli case, in particular, could unsettle some of the arguments made throughout the thesis, as it is the only US ally in the region. Other events that only appear in the dependent variable tangentially, like the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the 2006 Lebanon war, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen, could be stand-alone study cases for exploring how the triangle affects the regional order. Therefore, the study of the Persian Triangle does not fully conclude here; instead, the thesis has introduced a new topic into the IRME research agenda.

The analytical instrument developed in this thesis should now travel to other cases and regions. Good theories and concepts can produce tradeable goods that expand knowledge boundaries by traveling, adapting, and adjusting to other realities. It was never my intent to construct and examine this triangle only for adding it to the list of ‘exceptionalities’ that exclude the Middle East from the center of IR knowledge production. Thus, I expect this triangle framework to be adapted, with needed contextualization, to other multipolar regions marked by a certain level of local competition and foreign interference. For example, it would be valuable to see whether this framework works for triads like Brazil-Argentina-United States, Pakistan-India-China, or Japan-South Korea-United States. Also crucial is to explore whether the model works for three local actors in multipolar regions such as China-Japan-South Korea, Brazil-Argentina-Venezuela, or France-Germany-United Kingdom.

However, it is vital to stress the terms *travel* and *adapt*. While ideational, cognitive, and leadership elements were enough for explaining the Persian Gulf triangle, that does not mean those are the sole necessary intervening variables for other cases. While I believe these variables are broad enough to explore many cases in the Global South, science is not made out of intuition. For applying this NCR model to other cases, it is first necessary to investigate the dyads in-depth by dialoguing with respective specialized literature, as done in chapter two. Only then can one confirm if the intervening variables I suggested are enough for the specific case or if it is necessary to add others.

One limitation of my study that can be overcome by applying the model to other cases is the issue of when a triangle develops into another. For the Persian Gulf case, external conflictual events altered the balance of power, provoking new triangulations. These events were wars, or revolutions, which is in line with the system's high militarization characteristic. However, questions about how a triangle can evolve without a conflict or whether it can change due to a pacific alteration of the balance of power are still open. Besides, if it is possible to argue that through constant grand strategies interaction, an actor can manage to change some systemic dynamic, this conclusion would corroborate the assumption that the difference between NCR types is not methodological but related to case selection.

The thesis also dialogues significantly with the literature working with status and IR (Volgy et al. 2011a; Paul et al. 2014a; Renshon 2017) and with identity and IR (Giddens 1991; Chafetz et al. 1998; Mitzen 2006). In fact, it proposes that both fields cooperate by stressing the many links between them. I brought to light issues of ideological identities, Manicheism and perceptions, threat inflation, inherent mistrust, order anxiety, and ontological distress. Moreover, a more systemic study about how manicheist identities instigate states to be hypersensitive to threats or directly complicate conflict resolutions and negotiations is needed.

The link between anxiety and status satisfaction is an exciting topic for further analysis. Advancing the discussion that I initiated here is necessary for a clear definition of this link, which my thesis does only tangentially. For example, I discussed how the US role in the region sometimes mitigated while others augmented Saudi Arabia's anxieties towards the regional order, but does this happen with other's US partners in the region? Are there mechanisms to control these anxieties? Is anxiety a phenomenon inherent to unequal interdependent relations? Broadening this discussion could contribute to the elaboration of indicators to detect anxiety in

non-symmetrical partnerships, expanding knowledge about alliances, balancing, hedging, and strategic relationships.

Finally, the thesis proposed a differentiation between status-seeking behavior and revisionism. I argued that status-seeking actors are promotional behavior, which does not preclude altering the regional order. Before 1979, Iran was a status-seeking actor that wanted to promote itself to the UK position. It was not dissatisfied with its status quo because it perceived that other actors, such as the United States and the local monarchies, supported this ambition. However, since 1979, Iran wants to be a regional leader in a reformed regional order, one that is more endogenous and without US interference. Thus, it is a revisionist actor dissatisfied with the incumbent order. In the Saudi Arabian case, it is still not possible to define if its new ambition, in the long term, will make it a revisionist actor. If the leadership aims towards hegemony instead of a US surrogate position, then Saudi Arabia is challenging the US-prone regional order. Thus, an incipient product of my research is that status-seeking countries are not revisionist. However, for this assumption to be done it is necessary more substantial empirical analysis and comparisons.

In conclusion, this thesis states that Neoclassical Realism offers a path with a ready-made theoretical framework and methodology for IRME's scholars to generalize and theorize about the international politics while contributing to the Global IR movement and mitigating the region's isolation. It also enables scholars to include more particularism in their Realist analysis without degenerating the paradigm or distorting its tenets. The metaphilosophical discussions presented in chapter three aimed to clarify the difference between those that have been pathworking theoretical concepts and the NCR's synthetical, hierarchical, and replicable model. I expect that this brings forward more profound discussions about advancing IRME via NCR and helps to flesh out new research trends. Certainly, questions about which are the best types of intervening variables for the Middle East, how to include non-state actors and state-society relations to the analysis, and in which way complex relational arrangements influence and are influenced by regional order are far from being exhausted.

8.5.1 The fifth ongoing triangle

The fall of Mosul under ISIS control added to the list of intertwined security concerns between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Both the United States and Iran worried about containing the threat and took the event as an opportunity to increase their military and

security cooperation with Iraq. While the US air campaign and the Iranian ground campaign complemented each other, both actors denied cooperation or coordination (Colleau 2016, p. 47). Iran broadened its influence considerably over Iraqi and Syrian politics, particularly by IRGC training local forces and militias. The United States, on the other hand, returned to Iraq with a military advisory role that has been translated into political clout, balancing some of the Iranian influence (Abedin 2019, p. 127). Parallely, Saudi Arabia is trying to gain some political-economic leverage in Iraq since it opened its embassy in Baghdad in 2016, after a twenty-five-year break. Thus, to explore the fifth triangle, one must start by seeing Iraq as an arena for the three actors to project power, compete for influence, and seek their preferred regional order.

In tandem, major changes in the Saudi Arabian internal politics were happening. In January 2015, King Abdullah died, and his brother Salman took the throne. The king's son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), became the commander of the country's first autonomous military intervention in the region, the Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen, in March 2015. The 'Salman era' has turned scholars' attention to new state-society relations, transformations in regional politics, prospects for economic reforms, debates over the patriarchal bargain, and tensions between the religious fabric (Stenslie 2018; Hubbard 2020; Al-Rasheed 2018a). In addition, since the 2014 oil price decline, Saudi Arabia has been facing economic shortcomings and accumulating budget deficits (Gause 2018; Krane 2019). Thus, in April 2016, the country released the Saudi Vision 2030, a massive project that aims to transform the country into a financial and industrial powerhouse in a post-oil future. These internal changes need to be considered for explaining the fifth triangle.

MBS has pushed for a bolder foreign policy that assumes Iran to be the most significant threat (Rich 2012; Al-Rasheed 2018b). Indeed, a tendency that seems to be clear for the fifth triangle is the Iran-Saudi Arabia regional rivalry for influence. For example, Saudi Arabia justifies its war in Yemen by affirming that the Houthis are Iranian proxy actors. The incipient war on words detected by the end of the fourth triangle becomes a norm in the fifth triangle, with leaders from both Iran and Saudi Arabia accusing each other of instability, sectarianism, and opportunism (Mabon 2016; Hiro 2018; Ghattas 2020). In September 2015, a stampede in Mina prompted severe condemnation from Iranians, as more than 400 Iranian pilgrims died. In January 2016, influential Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was executed by the Saudi

government, driving a series of protests. In Tehran, demonstrators attacked the Saudi embassy, leading Riyadh to cut diplomatic ties, absent since then.

The US-Iranian dyad continued progressing while Obama was in power, but Saudi Arabia understood such improvement was at the costs of the US-Saudi ties. In July 2015, the Geneva interim accord evolved into the JCPOA nuclear deal, which was implemented in January 2016. Saudi Arabia was highly critical, with MBS threatening that he would develop a nuclear bomb if Iran did, boosting fears of a regional nuclear race (Reuters 15 March, 2018). At Rouhani's orders, Minister Zarif toured the GCC countries to reduce suspicions towards the JCPOA and improve regional cooperation, but those were mostly rejected (Ahouie 2020, p. 35). Similarly, Obama's 2015 US-GCC meeting at Camp David aimed to guarantee the monarchies that the Carter Doctrine was still standing, but the results were questionable (Colleau 2016, p. 48). Both Obama and Rouhani seem to have neglected the adverse effects the deal could have on Saudi Arabia's perception of environmental restriction. While a US-Iranian détente probably could limit the Saudi-Iranian competition (Aarts and van Duijne 2009, p. 75), that would only be possible if JCPOA passed the longevity test – something that collapsed due to Donald Trump's election.

The Trump administration grasped regional geopolitics through the lenses of traditional Middle Eastern partners, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel, embracing the view that Tehran was the primary source of instability. Trump positioned himself firmly against JCPOA and the sunset clauses over centrifuges and uranium enrichment, eventually exiting from the deal in May 2018. While pushing for a 'maximum pressure campaign' against Iran, Trump boosted ties with Saudi Arabia, showing a particular sympathy for MBS and his projects of militarization and modernization. In 2019, Trump's crusade picked up the pace, designating IRGC as a terrorist organization and eliminating waivers on the oil sanctions. Iran has responded with low-intensity military actions, sabotage, seizure of tankers, and other deniable attacks in the region (Ibishi 2019). In a new wave of pressure, Trump ordered a targeted attack that killed General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, a central figure in the IRGC. Iran responded by attacking US bases in Iraq while unintentionally shooting down the 752 Ukraine Airlines flight. Hence, the tension in the US-Iran dyad was higher than ever.

In conclusion, Trump declared victory against ISIS after the fall of Raqqa in October 2017. Even though he took the sole credit, Russian air attacks, combined with Iranian and

Hezbollah assistance, were essential in empowering the Syrian and Iraqi army against ISIS (Black 2018). Here is key to pinpoint that other foreign actors, such as Russia and China, have been engaging more and more in the region. Consequently, local actors have more leverage to deal with the global powers, navigating competing interests. For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran are enhancing their military and commercial opportunities with China and Russia through armaments purchases and diverse economic agreements. Thus, any assessment of the fifth triangle needs to take these elements into account.

With the elections of democrat President Joseph Biden in 2020, the United States once again signals it wants to return to nuclear negotiations with Iran, but many Iranian leaders are skeptical. In June 2020, hardliner Ebrahim Raisi was elected the new Iranian president. While that does not mean an abandonment of the JCPOA or a recrudescence of the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, it is possible to suppose that the outing of the moderates will complicate negotiations. In his first press collective since the election, Raisi sustained that a key goal is to improve ties with the Persian Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia (Hefezi 2021). So far, Riyadh has been reticent about both Biden's plan to return to JCPOA and Raisi's comments. However, Saudi Arabia's debacle in Yemen and its difficulty in influencing politics in Iraq or forcing Qatar to change its international behavior may have exposed the kingdom's limitations to compete for regional leadership. Nevertheless, a solution for the Persian Gulf's stability seems to be still locked into the triangulation. For that matter, future analysis of the fifth triangle through the model created here is pressing.

8.6 Final remarks

This thesis's research agenda was to develop an analytical framework to explore the relations between the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia as a sole complex interaction that affects the Persian Gulf's geopolitics. My motivation concerned a gap within the literature: there are many studies about the dyads (US-Iran, Iran-Saudi Arabia, US-Saudi Arabia), but I could not find a single template that explored, theoretically and conceptually, the visible interlinks between the three countries' activities in the region. By developing such a framework, this thesis tackled issues about the system, complex relations, power and ideological competitions, and extra-regional behavior. Approaching the topic via the strategic triangle concept, I offered much more nuance, exposing features that were unclear when we look at each bilateral relationship separately. Moreover, I scrutinized the three countries' grand strategies on the same level of

analysis, equally comparing their motivations and domestic pathologies without a biased assessment about their rationality – something that is still not as common as it should be in the literature.

By affirming that the triangle is a characteristic of the Persian Gulf system, this thesis provided new knowledge about systemic features, opening a research agenda to be further explored. How Iran organizes its grand strategy in the region depends on its perception of the US's and Saudi Arabia's grand strategies – being the inverse(s) also valid. A change within one of the dyads (for example, the US-Iran one) will have wanted or unwanted consequences on the other two dyads (US-Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia-Iran). The four triangles here explored provided new ideas about relational patterns, political tendencies, and power dynamics that can expand what we know about these three countries' international relations. Additionally, much can be discussed about the model's efficiency and attributes if the model is applied to other cases and regions, expanding, therefore, our knowledge about complex state-state relations beyond the bilateral setting.

Finally, the NCR approach enabled opening the black box of the state, showcasing how perceptions, identities, and leadership matter for the International Relations of the Middle East. The explanative chain I developed for this thesis was vital for exploring the impact of these internal factors in grand strategic assessment, as well as how to operationalize them into a structural theoretical framework. The predetermination that systemic factors are hierarchically superior to internal factors in clarifying regional international politics was crucial for the framework's efficiency. Most importantly, the thesis reinforced the efficiency of NCR frameworks as an alternative for Global South cases where a dependency on the structure in tandem with local particularities press for IR theories that can find a middle ground between parsimony and particularism.

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