ESSAY

# The impact of COVID-19 on the Persian Gulf: the realist perspective

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## Abstract

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

## Keywords

realism, COVID-19, Persian Gulf, Middle East, pandemic, coronavirus, China, U.S.

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## Introduction

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

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

To achieve the above purpose, I put forward a hypothesis according to which the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis was used by the authoritarian-patriarchic Arab-Persian Gulf states[1] to consolidate and strengthen regime power and conduct humanitarian/mask/COVID-19 diplomacy toward the regimes most affected by the pandemic, shifting the geopolitical landscape.

I examined the foreign and domestic policies of selected Arab-Persian Gulf states to verify this hypothesis. I will especially refer to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) case study as an essentially effective domestic and foreign policy to cope with the pandemic and take advantage of it. I also consider the securitization of the

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[1] Whenever "authoritarianism" is mentioned, the author is referring to patriarchal authoritarianism. The purpose is to indicate the existence of different types of authoritarianism, which may differ significantly from each other, e.g. authoritarianism in North Korea and authoritarianism in Qatar or the UAE. According to Inderpal Grewal authoritarian patriarchy has three main features: 1) family is a domain of morality, as both a public and private entity, 2) the patriarch presents a spectacle of power as well as intimacy with followers, using digital media technologies to produce a charismatic leadership 3) the promise of patrimony and patronage is used to generate accumulation for followers and to enable exploitation and lack of care towards others who are constructed as a threat to the family. I. Grewal, "Authoritarian Patriarchy and Its Populism," *English Studies in Africa* 63, no. 1 (2020): 179–198.

pandemic to show how a public health challenge was transformed into an internal state security issue and led to the application of repressive policy and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in Arab Persian Gulf states. I will also refer to the basic assumptions of realism (neoclassical realism) and internal and external variables that influence domestic and foreign policies.

The concept of securitization is associated with the Copenhagen School and is seen as a synthesis of constructivist and classical political realism in its approach.[2] What realism and securitization have in common is an approach that focuses primarily on security. In securitization and realism, actors strive to guarantee maximum security, which is perceived in different ways - objectively or subjectively. The Copenhagen School offers a broader concept of security that goes beyond the systemic and state level of analysis (Waltz). The concept of securitization is seen as a refreshing and welcome relief from the staid and tired theories of realism and liberalism.[3]

This article draws on data and statistics collected from the websites of the World Health Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It includes measures to contain the pandemic, economic and fiscal impacts on the MENA region, and social changes. The data is collected separately for each Arab-Persian Gulf country and is presented in Table 1. titled "An overview of selected health system responses and containment measures in the Arab-Persian Gulf countries." These data allow us to compare the responses of national health systems and show the scale of actions taken by state authorities to cope with the pandemic.

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

## A brief review of the literature

The coronavirus pandemic has sparked a discussion among representatives of the most important research trends in international relations. A brief review of the literature shows a growing number of publications on the impact of Covid-19 on the policy of the Arab-Persian Gulf states. However, there is no deeper analysis of the

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[2] M.C. Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies, Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 47 (2003): 512.

[3] R.J. Kilroy, "Securitization," *Handbook of Security Science* (2018): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51761-2_11-1.

**Table 1. Overview of selected health system responses and containment measures in the Arab-Persian Gulf countries.**

| | Curfews/Lockdowns/ movement restrictions | Social distancing measures and barrier gestures | Health screening/ tracking/quarantine | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Bahrain** | Night-time curfew (March–May); | Prohibition of gatherings of more than 5 people in public spaces; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation; | Screening of all incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine for positive patients; | Suspended flights; electronic waterproof wristbands with location-tracking to monitor individuals under home quarantine were introduced; violators are liable to imprisonment for 3 months and a fine of 1000–10000 Bahraini dinars; |
| **Kuwait** | Partial lockdown (March–May); Full lockdown (May); Night-time curfew; | Masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation; | Random testing of population; mandatory Covid-19 test for incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine for all incoming passengers; | Suspended flights; public holiday declared in March 2020; mosques and schools were closed; borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia were closed; the parliament's role in Kuwait was marginalized, the government received broader powers; |
| **Oman** | Night-time curfew (ended August 15); | Prohibition of all public gatherings; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation; | Screening of all incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine for incoming passengers; | Suspended flights; sale of shisha prohibited; schools and universities were closed; nationals were not allowed to depart to other countries; reduce the number of passengers in taxis in the sultanate from three to two passengers; 40 hotels across the sultanate had provided around 2,816 hotel rooms, to be used as COVID-19 relief; nine people were arrested for spreading rumors on COVID-19; Muscat was locked for 12 days; 34 expatriates were arrested in the Muscat governorate for playing cricket; |

| | Curfews/Lockdowns/ movement restrictions | Social distancing measures and barrier gestures | Health screening/ tracking/quarantine | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Qatar** | | Gatherings limited to 15 people indoors / 30 people outdoors; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation; | Health tracking app mandatory; Thermal screening in all public venues; | Suspended flights; public places were closed; mask were mandatory; 10 people were arrested for violation a home quarantine; |
| **Saudi Arabia** | Full lockdown or night-time curfew depending on areas (ended end of June); prohibition of entry to/exit from Riyadh, Mecca and Medina; law regulations were enforced by severe penalties for non-compliance from heavy fines to prison; | Umrah pilgrimage suspended; public gatherings limited to 50 people; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation; | Mandatory Covid-19 test for incoming passengers; mandatory quarantine (2 days) for incoming passengers; | Suspended flights; application Tawakkalna gathering vulnerable data (location, health status, access to medical services); sport competitions were held behind closed doors; closure of schools, universities, gym; |
| **United Arab Emirates** | Night-time curfew (March–July); two weeks full lockdown (April); travel restrictions in and out of Abu Dhabi; | Social gatherings limited to 10 people; masks mandatory in all public venues and public transportation; | Health tracking app mandatory; mandatory Covid-19 test for incoming passengers; mandatory self-quarantine & mandatory GPS tracking bracelet for incoming travellers to Abu Dhabi; | Suspended flights (excluding Bejing); schools closure; Al Ras area, one of Dubai's densely populated areas was closed down for 2 weeks; mosques and places of worship were suspended; before January 2021 Dubai promoted itself as an ideal place for holiday–after few weeks the number of new infections grown; Dubai tram and metro were suspended; criminal penalties for everyone spreading false information about the virus; |

authoritarianism of Arab monarchies in the context of COVID-19 or the use of realism to explain the behavior of the GCC states during the pandemic. Due to editorial limitations, I will focus on selected scientific articles, books, and reports.

I would like to start the review of the literature on the COVID-19 policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf with the voice of one of the representatives of the school of neorealism Stephen M. Walt. In the journal "Foreign Policy," Walt tried to point out the usefulness of realism. He argued that while realism does not pay much attention to the issue of potential pandemics such as the COVID-19 outbreak, it still emphasizes the importance of states as those on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19.[4] In an article written for the Institute for Security Policy in Vienna, Walt recalls that there are several areas where global cooperation is needed, and the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 world shows that it is in the common interest of all nations to prevent and contain the current and future pandemics. The essence of this view seems to be the belief that the pandemic will not abolish the competition for power but will only shift it in time.[5]

Rajesh Basrur and Fredrick Kliem provide important insight into understanding state behavior in the aftermath of the pandemic crisis. In the article: "Covid-19 and international cooperation: IR paradigms at odds,"[6] they ask: if a transboundary global crisis cannot spur international cooperation, then what can? and indicate that in the trust deficit in the international system, states hesitate to forgo self-help and zero-sum games. They emphasize that the global responses to the pandemic show the dominance of the state and individual national interests over collective interests. They highlighted that states try to imitate the successful activities of their peers. States look jealously upon one another and will adopt those measures used by others that are seen to be working.

Starting with the most recent publications, the article of Beverley Milton-Edwards is worth mentioning, "The survival of small states in the Persian Gulf region: COVID-19, pandemic politics and the future of niche diplomacy."[7] It analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small states like Kuwait and Qatar, revealing both the opportunities and limits of size and rich raw material resources. The article refers to theoretical frames based on realist narratives on power, highlighting the symbiosis between power and size. Milton-Edwards mentions Waltz, who claims "that states are differently placed by their power and their power status is dependent on size." Milton-Edwards emphasizes the meaning of

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[4] S.M. Walt, "The Realist's Guide to the Coronavirus Outbreak," *Foreign Policy,* March 9, 2020.

[5] S.M. Walt, "The Global Order After COVID-19," Paper, *Institut für Sicherheitspolitik*, 2020.

[6] R. Basrur and F. Kliem, "Covid-19 and international cooperation: IR paradigms at odds," *SN Soc Sci* 1, no. 7 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-020-00006-4.

[7] B. Milton-Edwards, "The survival of small states in the Gulf region: COVID-19, pandemic politics and the future of niche diplomacy," *Int Polit,* September 30, 2021, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00343-y.

humanitarian (politicized) aid or medical assistance was distributed using Qatar Airways or Qatar Charity, which became a part of branding during COVID-19.

There are several short articles on COVID-19 and authoritarianism in the Persian Gulf. One of them is "Digital authoritarianism in the GCC and the broader regional consequences," written by Afef Abrougui.[8] He argues that GCC states used technology as an enabler of digital oppression. The digital toolbox includes such instruments as internet filtering, censorship software, surveillance spyware and bots disseminating state propaganda and disinformation. They are used to control dissent and maintain power. Another article was written by Matthew Hedges, "Authoritarian exploitation of COVID-19 in the GCC."[9] He proves that the pandemic provided a platform for upgrading authoritarian measures. He indicates that COVID-19 has further highlighted the points of contention and intensified information warfare. Pandemic weapons enable states to successfully monopolize truth and create societies proficient in double-think. Meanwhile, effective response demands reliable information and societal trust.

Finally, there are numerous books that explore the Arab states' COVID-19 policies but do not make reference to international relations theories. One of the books that explores the impact and possible future outcomes in the Middle East is "The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa: Public Policy Responses," edited by Anis Ben Brik. Ben Brik wrote an article entitled "Social protection responses in the Arabian Gulf region."[10] He claims that the Arab-Persian Gulf states have taken unprecedented precautions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, including indefinite curfews and isolating major cities. Ben Brik stressed that the context of the social welfare system related to the COVID-19 pandemic was critical, as was the 2008 financial crisis and the Arab Spring. It provided social assistance to the poor and social security for working people during periods of unemployment to eliminate financial barriers to necessary research and health care. But he also drew attention to migrants who hadn't received financial support due to their lack of social insurance coverage and poverty.

The above literature review does not cover all the publications available on the market on COVID-19 policy in the Middle East. However, few authors refer to the IR theory to explain the COVID-19 pandemic, at least in relation to the GCC countries. Such a state of affairs might result from the belief that IR theories offer limited explanatory potential or the domination of a descriptive approach to COVID-19 in the region. Referring to the theory of international relations in analyzing

[8] A. Abrougui, "Digital authoritarianism in the TGCC and its broader regional consequences," in *Issues on the frontlines of technology and politics,* ed. S. Feldstein (2021), 17–19.

[9] M. Hedges, "Authoritarian Exploitation of COVID-19 in the GCC," in *POMEPS Studies 39 "The COVID-19 pandemic in North Africa and the Middle East",* (2020), 35–38.

[10] A. Ben Brik, "Social Protection Responses in the Arabian Gulf Region," in *The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa: Public Policy Responses,* 1st ed., ed. A. Ben Brik (Routledge, 2022).

the COVID-19 policy of countries in regions other than the Middle East is much more frequent. Hence, the following article is an attempt to fill the research gap and a contribution to further discussion on the policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf during the pandemic from the perspective of realism.

## The Middle East and the COVID-19 pandemic in the light of realism theory

Realism is one of the dominant theories of international relations that seek to explain the conditions and motives of a state's behaviors and foreign policy. According to the realists, international relations are dominated by states (state-centrism), each of whom acts and strives for its own national interest, understood in terms of strength. The goal of the state is the pursuit, possession and application of power, which gives predominance to one nation over others. Besides power, the primary concern of all states is security (power politics) based on militaries which secure its survival but simultaneously lead to a security dilemma.[11] According to the realists, power or the threat of using power remains the most effective tool in foreign policy.

Realism is not a monolith but rather a diverse body of thought. Since there are different variations of realism, the interpretations also differ. Classical realism, represented by Hans Morgenthau, among others, sees the sources of conflict in the egoistic nature of humanity, which also applies to the behavior of states.[12] Neorealists, represented by Kenneth Waltz, among others, focus on anarchy in the international system, *i.e.* the lack of a supreme authority that would have a monopoly on resolving disputes, enforcing the law, regulating the system of international politics and managing international relations, including the managing of crises such as pandemics.[13] As the dominant international actors, when under threat, states rely on themselves to adopt a *self-help strategy* to survive and thus ensure their safety, which in turn depends on their power. Therefore, the acquisition of more power remains a crucial element in the *raison d'état* of the state.[14]

One of the last developments in the realism theory include neoclassical realism which appeared in the 1990s. This approach primarily emphasizes the role of internal factors (such as internal structure of the states, relations of state-society level, political processes withing the state, economic development of the state, role of leaders, political system) in the foreign policy of state. Internal possibilities and limitations should be treated as intervening variables that influence the dependent

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[11] A security dilemma is when many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others. As a result, it leads to competition between states and strains political relations.

[12] H. Morgenthau and K. Waltz, *Politics Among Nations. The struggle for power and peace* (Beijing: McGraw-Hill, 1997).

[13] K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Beijing: McGraw-Hill, 1997).

[14] S. Walt, "The Realist's Guide to the Coronavirus Outbreak," *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/09/coronavirus-economy-globalization-virus-icu-realism/.

variable, *i.e.* the foreign policy of the state and the independent variable – the distribution of power in the international system and the international structure.[15]

In the conflictual conditions of the Middle East, realism is considered the most effective and applicable conceptual perspective through which to view the region.[16] Stephen Walt, a representative of defensive realism, demonstrated that the states in the Arab world very often block any one country from gaining dominance, despite persistent calls for Arab unity and concerted efforts by one government to exert leadership in inter-Arab affairs. Walt argued that concrete measures of power have less impact than more fluid notions of threat in determining how the states of the region interact.[17] Security dilemmas tend to spark arms races and aggravate mistrust and antagonism among states. Some of them engage in balancing behavior when they confront actual or potential aggressors to preserve the stability of the system. In contrast, others choose to align with the aggressor in the hope that they will be rewarded for their support (bandwagoning). External and internal threats perceived by a group of states might integrate them and lead to the emergence of regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council.[18] Competition for power and maximization of power perceived as a way to state survival and a guarantee of state security lies in the heart of the Arab states' domestic and foreign policies.

To illustrate the advantage of realism over other theories in explaining international reality in the Middle East, we could compare it to liberalism. According to liberalism, the conditions for effective cooperation between states are democracy, economic interdependence and institutions. In the Middle East, none of these conditions is met to a degree that ensures cooperation, security and peace in the region. This is one of the many reasons for the lack of effective cooperation between the region's states, with the simultaneous dominance of political and military disputes and conflicts.

The global pandemic crisis that originated in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 sparked a wave of comments and research studies on international relations. The theory that found particular recognition and proved effective in explaining the effects of the global pandemic crisis was realism. Primarily because it emphasized the dominance of the state in international relations and individual national interests over collective ones in the absence of a common global response to COVID-19. It does not mean that cooperation did not occur during the pandemic

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[15] J. Zajączkowski, "The United States in India's Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region Since 2014," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 50 (2021).

[16] J. Hoffman, "Power and Security: Realist Theory and the Middle East in the post-Arab Uprisings Context," *Towson University Journal of International Affairs* 52 (2019).

[17] S. Walt, *The origins of alliances* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[18] *International relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed., ed. L. Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 24–26.

crisis, but that it only appeared when it didn't clash with national interest.[19] Realism reminds us that, because of the trust deficit systemically inherent in an international system characterized by anarchy, states hesitate to forgo their first instinct for self-help, even amidst a shared global challenge.[20]

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

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

It is hard to disagree with realism about the fact that in the global pandemic crisis, states were the actors most responsible for the survival and security of the state and its societies. However, realism did not help explain why the most powerful states such as China, India or the US, despite power resources such as a large population, territory, economic strength and military power, were among the most affected by COVID-19. In contrast, small Persian Gulf states such as Qatar and the

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[19] R. Basrur and F. Kliem, "Covid-19 and international cooperation: IR paradigms at odds," *SN Social Sciences* 1 (2021).

[20] Basrur and Kliem, "Covid-19 and international."

UAE appeared to be more successful in addressing non-traditional security concerns. In the neo-realist tradition, small states are regarded as weak, but their size turned out to be an advantage in response to the coronavirus. In this particular case, a small population and small territorial size turned out to be easier to control the spread of the coronavirus.[21]

## Domestic policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf – the role of the states in fight with COVID-19

The aim of this section is to explore the modus operandi of Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf in dealing with COVID-19. Stephen Walt reminds us that the "structural version of realism tends to downplay differences among states; thus far, responses to the coronavirus outbreak are exposing the strengths and weakness of different types of regimes." Authoritarian regimes quickly mobilize resources and can shut down entire cities and impose far-reaching restrictions.[22]

The first reports on COVID-19 in the Middle East were issued by the WHO in February 2020. The virus was probably transmitted by passengers flying from China to Iran. Contrary to other states that suspended flights to and from China, Iran left its borders open for aircraft from China operated, among others, by Mahan Air, affiliated with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.[23] This reaction was in line with the realism assumption that emphasizes the state's dominant role in international relations and authority decisions on implementing (or not) crisis management procedures to protect the country and ensure the state's survival. Countries, not international organizations, have been on the front lines in the fight against the coronavirus. The reaction time to the increase in infections in societies by states was much shorter than by international organizations, especially in authoritarian states (more on this issue in the following part of the article). There was no doubt that states had a wide range of measures at their disposal to counter the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

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

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[21] D. Galeeva, "'Weak' and 'Strong' states in pandemic times. Power and influence during a global health crisis," *The Rusi Journal* 166 (2021).

[22] S. Walt, "The Realist's Guide to the Coronavirus Outbreak," *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2020, https://foreign-policy.com/2020/03/09/coronavirus-economy-globalization-virus-icu-realism/.

[23] K. Lim, "With COVID-19, Iran's dependence on China grows," *Policy Watch 3290*, March 27, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/covid-19-irans-dependence-china-grows.

movement restrictions and social distancing. Saudi Arabia suspended pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina and limited access to religious sites in early February.[24]

In response to the COVID-19 threat, Arab-Persian Gulf states used the army and the police to enforce movement restrictions. Artificial intelligence (drones/robots/ video, software/surveillance cameras) was responsible for tracking citizens and recognizing their faces, voices and license plates; a curfew and electronic monitoring of infected people who contracted the virus were introduced, and even ordinary citizens had to fill out an online form to leave their place of residence (Dubai),[25] civil liberties and privacy were restricted, and gathering and travel abroad were banned on the pretext of limiting the transmission of the virus. Spreading false information about the virus, violating COVID regulations or promoting information which contradicted the authorities' official statements, could result in arrest (Saudi Arabia) or fines up to 20 000 Dirhams (UAE), equivalent to 5,400 USD.[26]

Such an application of extraordinary security measures (*e.g.* introducing a state of emergency, putting the army on the streets) to protect an entity (*e.g.* a state, society, ideology, culture) which, according to the actor taking these measures (the so-called securitizing actor), is existentially endangered is called securitization.[27] The leaders of the Arab-Persian Gulf states (and not only them) recognized that COVID-19 poses a threat not only to public health but also to state security. The pandemic, therefore, became a pretext for an intensified repressive policy and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies. Such a political practice should come as no surprise as very often, crises and threats are taken advantage of by religious or governmental circles. A good example of this is an attempt to marginalize groups by blaming them for transmitting the virus, Shiites or Sunnis, (*e.g.* the Arab states in the Persian Gulf quickly closed their borders to Iranians) or manipulating disease statistics. Due to the epidemiological threat, public demonstrations were also banned, which became a convenient argument for the authorities to limit the activities of the political opposition. In such situations, it seems that for the authoritarian Arab regimes, the indicator of success was, to a lesser extent, the effective fight against COVID-19 but rather effectively taking advantage of the pandemic and amassing political capital from it.[28]

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[24] C. Conde and A. Pataud, "COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries," https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129919-4li7bq8asv&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-MENA-Countries.

[25] M. Hedges, "Authoritarian Exploitation of COVID-19 in the GCC," *POMEPS Studies* 39 (2020): 35.

[26] J. Fenton-Harvey, "Coronavirus in the Gulf: A Lasting Authoritarianism?," May 4, 2020, https://research.sharqforum.org/2020/05/04/coronavirus-in-the-gulf-a-lasting-authoritarianism/.

[27] B. Buzan, O. Waever and J. de Wilde, *Security: A new framework for analysis* (London: Boulder, 1998).

[28] M. Duclos and H. El-Karoui, "Is Covid-19 a game-changer for the Middle East and the Maghreb?," April 23, 2020, https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/covid-19-game-changer-middle-east-and-Maghreb.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an intense discussion began in power circles on strengthening the prerogatives of the authorities to fight the pandemic more effectively. For example, in Kuwait, which provides relative freedom, political participation and an elected parliament, the pandemic strengthened public confidence in the government regarding crisis management. With the pandemic outbreak, the parliament's role in Kuwait was marginalized, the government received broader powers (including the obligation to consult any parliamentary decisions with the government), and most parliamentary sessions were suspended. As a result, the importance of the legislature has decreased, and the decisions taken restricting freedom and civil liberties were rationalized by the crisis situation.[29]

In the light of the above-described measures taken by Arab states in the face of the pandemic challenge, the central role of the state's security and permanent insecure environment comes to the forefront. States must provide security for themselves because no other actor will do it for them. The mechanism states used to make themselves more secure was maximizing power, mobilizing the police and army, limiting civil liberties and using technological innovations. However, it is not the politics of power or the will to dominate, usually indicated by realists, that cause the security problem, but the coronavirus pandemic. But it was definitely state actors who took responsibility for resolving the problem of insecurity using political and security instruments, as well as law regulations. While these instruments were briefly described (emergency state, military, and police force, introducing a curfew, banning demonstrations), the vaccine became a new instrument of diplomacy (COVID-19 /vaccine diplomacy).

By the end of 2021, full vaccination rates were as follows: the UAE 89%, Qatar 88%, Saudi Arabia 66%, Kuwait 74%, Bahrain 67% and Oman 56%.[30] The difference between the first UAE and last Oman was 33% and shows that authorities in Abu Dhabi far outdid other states. Implementing a vaccination program resulted in lower hospitalization and mortality rates compared to other regions, partly due to the very young regional population (60% of the Middle East population is under the age of 25). In the Persian Gulf, the most vulnerable population were expatriate workers, living in more crowded and less sanitary conditions with unequal access to health services. As a result, the mortality rates among migrant workers were higher than among the local populations.[31] Material capabilities such as monetary reserves (that translate into medical infrastructure, access to the vaccines) are according to the offensive realist John Mearshimer, are one of the building blocks of

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[29] F. Al-Sulaib, "The Political Effect of the Corona Crisis on the Arab Gulf States," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Policy Report* 2 (2020).

[30] All data comes from https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?.

[31] L. Fawcett, "The Middle East and Covid-19, time for collective action," *Globalization and Health* 17 (2021).

power and were crucial to cope with the pandemic.[32] Material potential of the UAE (support humanitarian initiatives, donating medical aid and equipment in 128 countries) became a vital part of the mask/COVID-19 diplomacy improving state branding and strengthen its position on the international arena.[33]

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

## Foreign policy and the balance of power in the Persian Gulf

COVID-19 policy has become a part of states' foreign policy to pursue their goals such as increasing security, improving their image (state branding) and increasing power. One such example is the UAE, which successfully used the COVID-19/ vaccine/mask diplomacy (as did China) to strengthen its image as a partner and ally in times of crisis. First, the government in Abu Dhabi used its position as a logistics hub in the region and established cooperation with vaccine manufacturers to become a regional transport and distribution center. Thanks to the agreement with Sinopharm China National Biotec Group and Abu Dabi Group 42 (artificial intelligence company), the UAE produced 200 million vaccine doses annually. Secondly, due to the disruption of food supply chains by COVID-19, the UAE launched the "100 million meals" program, supplying food to nearly 30 countries in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe. The UAE also founded a platform for donors from over 51 countries as well as various local, regional and international organizations.[34]

The UAE became a donor of medical aid (masks, gloves, protective clothing and more) to Iran, the coronavirus epicenter in the region with the highest infection and death rates. It is worth mentioning that some Arab-Persian Gulf states perceived Iran

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[32] J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 55.

[33] *The UAE's humanitarian efforts during COVID-19*, https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/justice-safety-and-the-law/handling-the-covid-19-outbreak/humanitarian-efforts.

[34] A. Krzymowski, "Role and Significance of the United Arab Emirates Foreign Aid for Its Soft Power Strategy and Sustainable Development Goals," *Social Sciences* 11 (2022).

as an enemy. Such a turn of the UAE toward the Persian state can be viewed through the prism of neoclassical realism (Gideon Rose, Thomas Christiansen, Randall Schweller, William Wohlforth, Fareed Zakaria), which holds that the foreign policy of states is a consequence of external challenges, especially changes in the relative power of states. Such a move by the UAE (as well as Qatar and Kuwait) allowed them to play a greater international role than their power would imply. Neoclassical realists stress that sometimes states put security first, and other times they take risks to transform the international scene in line with their interests.[35] Iran has an unresolved territorial dispute with the UAE over the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa islands which it seized in 1971. Since COVID-19 has reduced the Iranian threat, the authorities in Abu Dhabi have decided to lend support to their geopolitical rival, putting aside past disputes. Similar aid was delivered by Kuwait and Qatar and Western European countries, Russia, China and Japan. These actions helped to lower the temperature of mutual tensions between the countries of the subregion in which the crisis (2019–2021) was caused by military tensions between Iran and the US and their allies in the region.

The authorities in Abu Dhabi sent a medical aid shipment to Wuhan, China's "center" of the pandemic, Afghanistan, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Pakistan, Serbia and the Seychelles. The aid that the Arab Emirates gave China especially has shown that the support that both countries have given each other in the fight against the pandemic may open a new chapter in mutual relations. The UAE supported China not only materially but also morally when Burj Khalifa, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and other iconic landmarks were illuminated in the colors of the Chinese flag as a sign of solidarity with the Chinese people. This form of foreign policy, known as humanitarian diplomacy, has gained widespread recognition, including from the WHO and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

The scope and ambition of a UAE foreign policy derives from its growing place in the international system and its huge material power capabilities. These two, for neoclassical realism, constitute a driving force of foreign policy. However, they do not reduce foreign policy solely to these variables. Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter. Moreover, political leaders in authoritarian states have complete freedom to extract national resources exactly in the way UAE has done. According to neoclassical realists these internal factors impact of state behavior. And last but not least, neoclassical realists argue that the impact of systemic pressures may shape directions of foreign policy especially as a particular time. They believe understanding links between power and policy requires close examination of the contexts within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented.[36] In

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[35] A. Hyde-Price, "Neorealism: A Structural Approach to CSDP," in *Explaining the UE's Common Security and Defence Policy. Theory in Action*, eds. X. Kurowska and F. Breuer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 18–21; T. Dyson, *Neoclassical Realism and Defense Reform in Post-Cold War Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 120.

[36] G. Rose, "Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy," *World Politics* 51 (1998): 144–172.

times where a virus threatens security of states all around the world, each of them implements crisis management procedures and "emergency" foreign policies, but their efficiency is determined by variables mentioned above.

Besides improving relations between the UAE and Iran, a kind of de-securitization could be observed in Saudi Arabia – Iran relations. From April to October 2021, four rounds of talks were held between these two countries, concerning, *inter alia*, the reopening of the Iranian consulate in Jeddah. The openness of both countries to dialogue aimed to reduce the level of mutual animosity was ground-breaking news in the context of the last 40 years of deep hostility. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, emphasized the importance of good relations with Iran as a neighbor, expressed his hopes to overcome mutual difficulties and build positive relations that would be beneficial for the entire region. Alongside demographic changes, the sanctions imposed on Iran, changes in the White House and in the US' Middle East policy, the pandemic acted as one of many catalysts in the process of deescalating tensions. Indeed, it had a significant financial and economic impact in the context of the announced Vision 2030 program to reduce Arab-Persian Gulf states dependence on oil, diversify its economies and develop public services sectors. If Arab-Persian Gulf states want to implement it effectively, the authorities in Riyadh must attract foreign investors and thus limit the policy of military intervention in the region, which put a severe strain on the kingdom's budget and international image.[37] The pandemic alerted the Arab-Persian Gulf states that they should focus on shifting their economy away from dependence on natural resources towards international investment and the private sector.

The pandemic turned out to be a catalyst/accelerator for the strengthening of Sino-Arab relations in parallel with the transfer of power in the USA (Donald Trump replaced by Joe Biden) and the reevaluation of priorities in American foreign policy (democratic norms and values, fighting the pandemic at home, withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan) compared with the presidency of Donald Trump.[38]

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[37] S. Mabon, S. Naszrzadeh and E. Alrefai, "De-securitisation and Pragmatism in the Persian Gulf: The Future of Saudi-Iranian Relations," *The International Spectator* 56 (2021): 66–83.

[38] At this point, it is worth briefly outlining the US-China rivalry in the Persian Gulf to better understand the context of the current situation. Both China and the US have ambitions to dominate the international arena, and the Middle East is no different. The main subject of relations between the US and China in the Persian Gulf are: 1) the attitude towards Iran (China supports Iran economically and militarily, while the US treats Iran as a bitter enemy) 2) the attitude towards the Gulf states (a) China tries not to interfere in internal conflicts, while the US is against Iran, and supports Israel and the Arab monarchies, (b) the current partnership of the US with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf has weakened, which was taken advantage of by China including these states in the One Belt One Road initiative 3) oil supplies (for China 60% of its oil demand is met by all Gulf countries, while for the USA this value is 9%) 4) the attitude towards human rights (China ignores human rights violations and for the USA human rights are an important argument "for" or "against" cooperation with the Gulf states). These focal points in relations between USA and China led Washington and Beijing to a collision course in the Persian Gulf. J.W. Garver, "China and America in the Persian Gulf," *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (New York, 2016; online ed., Oxford Academic, March 24, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190261054.003.0021.

Already in 2019, the energy interdependence between China and the GCC countries meant that their fuel exports there exceeded their fuel exports to the US, where shale production reduced the country's dependence on GCC countries fivefold.[39] However, there were more reasons for the beneficial Arab-Chinese cooperation.

First of all, the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at reactivating the Silk Road, provides opportunities for cooperation in the field of infrastructure and financial projects, economic diversification plans and renewable energy sources. The GCC countries are pressed for time, wanting to achieve as much as possible from the assumed economic reforms under the Vision 2030 programs. China not only efficiently neutralized the adverse effects of the pandemic in its own country by creating an image of an effective anti-COVID policy but also lacks the baggage of difficult historical experiences with the countries of the region that the US, which was involved in a series of conflicts with Arab states and Iran, has.[40]

Secondly, China has cooperated with the Persian Gulf states in the fight against the pandemic as part of the so-called Health Silk Road. China's health policy is part of its foreign policy. The Middle Kingdom has provided aid to combat the pandemic to 150 countries and four international organizations, and Chinese experts have held videoconferences with over 170 countries. The large-scale international activity of China has become a challenge for the United States, confirming the rivalry between the two powers. It is also worth noting that the help in the fight against COVID-19 was not one-sided. The Middle East countries also helped China by sending millions of masks and other medical aid. China indirectly referred to the theory of complex interdependence, recalling that in the times of globalization, the interests of all countries in the world are intertwined, and human society shares a common future.[41]

China also took advantage of the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and seized the initiative. This resulted in the signing of strategic partnerships with, *inter alia*, Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Sudan, Iraq, Morocco, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait and Djibouti. On the one hand, China imports crude oil and natural gas (nearly half of its imports come from the Persian Gulf). On the other hand, China supplies military equipment to Saudi Arabia (with which it conducts military exercises) and Iran (fighters and tanks). One of the reasons the Arab states in the Persian Gulf turned to China was the deterioration of relations with the US after the Arab Spring in the Obama era, but also as a result of such statements by

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[39] E. Akkas and S. Altiparmak, "The Reshaping Oil and Arms Trade between the United States and GCC: Is the Theory of Complex Interdependence Still Prevailing?," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (November, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211058880.

[40] R. Mason, "Is the sky the limit to the China- Gulf partnership," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 12, 2021, https://agsiw.org/is-the-sky-the-limit-to-the-china-gulf-partnership/.

[41] Y. Zoubir, "China's 'Health Silk Road' Diplomacy in the MENA," *Med Dialogue Series* 27 (2020): 1–14.

Trump that argued that the Gulf states should take responsibility for their security. As a result, the gap between what the Arab-Persian Gulf states expect from the United States and what Washington is willing to offer has widened, leading to a recalibration of their policies. Finally, medical assistance was an important argument in relations between the Persian Gulf states and China. China saw mask diplomacy as an opportunity to get rid of the label of the "creator of COVID-19" and gain an advantage over the US, which in the face of the global pandemic did little to prove its leadership position.

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

While the US support is long-term in nature, China's aid was mainly limited to providing medical resources and medical knowledge in the fight against the pandemic. Development aid in the form of building hospitals, debt relief, financial support or the provision of vaccines is an opportunity to strengthen China's position, something that China has scrupulously used, while the MENA countries have expressed public recognition for the aid it provided.[42]

From the realist perspective, it seems surprising that cooperation rather than pure competition or conflict strengthens China's position in the Persian Gulf. China does not use hard power instruments but economic, business and diplomatic methods to gain an advantage over the USA's position in the Persian Gulf. It is clear that China's growing power and influence in the Persian Gulf, seen at least since the Carter Doctrine as a sphere of American influence, will inevitably lead to Sino-American hostility and a classic power dilemma. China has already emerged as a primary economic trading partner with the states of the subregion. However, for the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the diversification of relations or balancing between these two powers seems to be the most attractive strategy. This new multipolar reality that includes US, Chinese and Russian interests in the subregion has pushed the major GCC states to adopt a strategic neutrality which we could see during the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022.[43]

Finally, it was not institutions but states that played a key role in fighting the pandemic. Economic interdependence, a fundamental tenet of liberalism, led to an accelerated transmission of the virus that was fought more often by bilateral

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[42] Zoubir, "China's 'Health Silk Road' Diplomacy in the MENA," 1–14.

[43] G.M. Feierstein, B.Y. Saab and K.E. Young, "US-Gulf relations at the crossroads: time for a recalibration," *MEI Policy Memo,* 2022.

agreements than by a multilateral system. This can be seen in the case of the United Arab Emirates, Iran or China, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. In domestic politics, the pandemic was used by authoritarian states to consolidate their power at home (consolidating authoritarian power and a wave of authoritarianism have been observed worldwide since 2007, according to the Freedom House). On the other hand, in foreign policy, some countries (China, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) used humanitarian aid provided to other countries to strengthen their position in the international arena.

## The Gulf Cooperation Council and its reaction to COVID-19

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

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

Another important remark concerns the Saudi-Qatar diplomatic crisis that started on 5 June 5 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt (the countries of the so-called Anti-Terrorist Quartet) accused Qatar of supporting terrorist and religious groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, to destabilize the security states in the region. The countries of the so-called Anti-Terrorist Quartet severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed sanctions on the country, including closing land, sea and air borders, breaking trade agreements, including for the supply of food, and closing their markets for goods from Qatar. In the end, the coercive diplomacy of the Quartet countries did not force any concessions from the Doha government. Qatar introduced an effective crisis management mechanism and a policy of adaptation to the new conditions of political and economic shock. This dispute inside the GCC was an important obstacle to taking effective measures in response to COVID-19, but at the same time, the pandemic crisis became a catalyst in the process of deescalating mutual tensions.

This mutual tension between the GCC member states was evident in the first phase of the pandemic, when in February 2020, Qatar Health Minister Hanan Muhammad al-Kuwari was not allowed to enter Saudi Arabia and, as a result, could not participate in a meeting devoted to the joint anti-COVID-19 response. In March, 31 Bahraini citizens flying from Iran were stuck in Qatar. Emir Tamim ibn Hamad al-Thani proposed to transport the Bahrainis by his private plane to

Manam at his own expense. Bahrain rejected the offer and accused Qatar of exposing the passengers to infections and using Bahraini citizens in the dispute with the Kingdom.[44] But an increasing wave of the pandemic and rising death indicator resulted in decreasing hostility against Qatar.

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

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

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

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

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[44] S. Nowacka, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Pandemic," https://pism.pl/publications/The_Gulf_Cooperation_Council_and_the_Pandemic.

## Conclusion

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

When answering the first question, we should refer to "non-cooperative internal policy." During the pandemic, the Middle East was a region where cooperative mechanisms were weak and state-led efforts to address the Covid-19 pandemic dominated (instead of a multilateral response). The Arab-Persian Gulf states were heavily dependent on the efforts of individual states and some overseas allies. One of the reasons is the character of the MENA region, which is often classified as a conflict formation, where major powers are accompanied by violence and states consider each other as a potential threat (security dilemma) and don't trust each other (a fundamental premise of realism). Similar to limited regionalism in the Arab world that derives from the reluctance to transfer loyalty, expectations, and political activity to a supranational level, during the pandemic period authoritarian states were afraid that international institutions could interfere in their internal affairs or impose specific regulations or regimes. Additionally, cooperation within the GCC was affected by the diplomatic crisis in 2017 and a national approach to fighting the pandemic prevailed over the regional approach. Emphasizing the effects of the policy of non-cooperation, it is worth mentioning the dominance of the national response to the pandemic threat. It allowed the Arab leaderships to strengthen the prerogatives of the authorities, introduce extraordinary measures and efforts to fight the pandemic, integrate humanitarian aid into foreign policy and strengthen the position of some countries, both in the region and beyond. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf enacted some of the strictest measures in the world, including location-based contract tracing, prison sentences for breaking the law, suspending pilgrimages, and closing religious sites. Electronic tags linked to the phones of COVID-19 victims bring to mind the tracking of criminals, a thought-provoking and very insightful comparison. Repressive mechanisms are commonplace in the Persian Gulf, where police control the public sphere and limit civil and political rights. The GCC states are aware of the threat of information control and have already learned how to use it for their purposes. The GCC states were the victims and proponents of the propaganda and misinformation campaigns that often led to disputes and information warfare. In Arab authoritarian states, information is a weapon that enables states to monopolize truth and use it to consolidate

power.[45] As an example, it is sufficient to point to the diplomatic crisis in the Persian Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, triggered by the publication of alleged words by the Sheikh of Qatar that he supported terrorist organizations and Iran. The sheikh of Qatar denied these words; however, the so-called Anti-terrorist Quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) severed relations with Qatar and imposed sanctions on the emirate. COVID-19 became another cause to empower its authority over society and strengthen its legitimacy.

Regarding the second research question: how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the foreign policy of the Arab-Persian Gulf states and the sub-regional balance of power? I have showed in the article that the pandemic provided an opportunity for de-escalation between the UAE and Saudi Arabia with Iran (the state most affected by COVID-19 in the Middle East) or even to rebuild regional order. I also showed that China's growing interests in the Persian Gulf collide with those of the US while giving Arab states additional options to balance these two superpowers. China is gaining influence in the subregion at the United States' expense and achieving the status of a powerful actor in the Middle East. A few years ago, the Persian Gulf was perceived to be solely within the American sphere of influence, but today it has become important for China as well to implement win-win partnerships with Arab-Persian Gulf states (for example, Chinese investments in infrastructure of $20 billion and $3 billion in loans for the banking sector).[46] Above analysis has led to the conclusion that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic and foreign policy. According to this report, COVID-19 contributed to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, which took up the fight against the pandemic largely without assistance and cooperation with other states and international institutions. At the same time, the pandemic directed their foreign policy also towards authoritarian states (China), although it was more concerned with economic policy and less with the fight against the pandemic.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the GCC states in fighting COVID-19, they fared better than other countries in the Middle East due to their more advanced healthcare systems and constant cash flows from selling crude oil/natural gas to mitigate the economic damage. It can be viewed as the Arab-Persian Gulf states' *modus operandi* to cope with the virus: crisis management based on measures to secure the regimes, provide financial support for their societies and protect the economy.

The application of insights from neoclassical realism helped answer research questions about the relations between authoritarian political system and domestic and foreign policies in the face of the threat (pandemic). Realism is the theory

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[45] M. Hedges, "Authoritarian Exploitation of COVID-19 in the GCC," *POMEPS Studies* 39 (April, 2020): 35–38.

[46] A. Benerji, *Health Silk Route: China and the Middle East*, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/05/15/health-silk-route-china-and-the-middle-east/.

with a greater explanatory potential for illuminating the behavior of states under the threat of a pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the dominance of state actors in international relations *vis-à-vis* regional institutions. It was also used to strengthen countries' position in the international arena, especially by the UAE and China. The humanitarian aid provided by these countries may constitute a springboard for further investments. The pandemic also brought many challenges and threats, at least during its initial period, such as the economic crisis (*e.g.* the oil crisis), the lack of preparation to fight the pandemic (*e.g.* in Iran) or the limitation of multilateral cooperation (*e.g.* within institutions). Because if a common threat, the COVID-19 pandemic, can't spark cooperation in the region, then what can?