

# Intra-Regional Alignment Strategy of Small States in Gulf area: Cases of Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE)

*Strategi Penjajaran Politik Serantau Negara-Negara Teluk: Kes Qatar dan Emiriah Arab Bersatu (UAE)*

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## ABSTRACT

The Middle East may not possess any great power, but the region has, within itself, several states that hold relatively bigger capabilities and resources compared to the others. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Egypt, and previously Iraq, are competing to be the main stakeholder in this highly chaotic region. This paper attempts to do a comparative analysis on two gulf countries: Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The two countries are selected as both are the key economic and strategic players among the small states in the Middle East. The intra-regional alignment behavior of Qatar and UAE as small states in Middle East proves that even in a region where alignments are multi-layered (with intra-regional powers and with international big powers), small states alignment behavior is heavily driven by the intention of minimizing threats, if not to diminish it completely. Such behavior is expected from states that feel vulnerable within the anarchical environment externally. The external threats and uncertainties, however, are selected and faced according to how the ruling elite perceives it. To preserve domestic political legitimacy, threats and alignment choices become the useful cards for the ruling elites to show their authority, performance, and stature to their domestic audience.

## KEYWORD

Middle East,  
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## ABSTRAK

*Meskipun di Timur Tengah tidak terdapat negara yang bertaraf kuasa besar, tetapi wilayah ini memiliki beberapa negara yang memiliki kemampuan dan sumber daya yang lebih besar dibandingkan dengan negara lain di rantau itu. Arab Saudi, Iran, Israel, Mesir, dan sebelumnya Iraq, bersaing untuk menjadi pemegang kepentingan utama di wilayah yang bergolak ini. Penulisan ini merupakan analisis perbandingan dua negara: Qatar dan Emiriah Arab Bersatu (UAE). Kedua-dua negara dipilih kerana kedua-duanya merupakan pemain ekonomi dan strategik utama di antara negeri-negeri kecil di Timur Tengah. Strategi penjajaran politik serantau Qatar dan UAE sebagai negara-negara kecil di Timur Tengah membuktikan bahawa meskipun di sebuah rantau di mana penjajarannya mempunyai pelbagai peringkat (dengan kuasa serantau dan kuasa antarabangsa), strategi penjajaran negara-negara kecil banyak didorong oleh matlamat untuk meminimumkan ancaman. Strategi seperti ini dapat dijangka daripada negara-negara yang merasa rentan dengan golongan anarkis luaran. Ancaman bagaimanapun ditentukan sesuai dengan pandangan elit pemerintah. Untuk mengekalkan legitimasi politik mereka, penentuan ancaman dan strategi penjajaran menjadi alat bagi elit pemerintah untuk memaparkan kewibawaan, prestasi, dan status mereka kepada rakyat tempatan.*

## KATA KUNCI

*Timur Tengah, negeri kecil, penjajaran serantau, elit, strategi*

## 1.0 Introduction

The Middle East may not possess any great power, but the region has, within itself, several states that hold relatively bigger capabilities and resources compared to the others. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Egypt, and previously Iraq, are competing to be the main stakeholder in this highly chaotic region. As a regional hegemon, they will hold the upper hand in shaping the affairs of the region to benefit their interests, apart from having the priority of strategic cooperation from world big powers. As the rewards are lucrative, rivalries exist constantly throughout time. Power polarity within the region naturally pushed the small states in the region to think about their alignment choice if they want to survive in term of security and economy. By choosing useful allies and aligning themselves with certain power, whether in peace or conflict, they would be able to *magnify* their limited power and to some extent deter their national threats.

This paper studies the alignment pattern of small states in the Middle East region, especially in the Gulf area. For that purpose, this paper investigates the following questions: what are the motives of their alignment? In what way do their choices of alignment converge and diverge? What drives their alignment decisions? This paper attempts to find the answers by doing comparative analysis on two gulf countries: Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The two countries are selected as both are the key economic and strategic players among the small states in the Middle East. In term of economy, both states have the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the Gulf area with hydrocarbon/energy as source of income. In term of security, Qatar and UAE are strategic allies of the US in the Middle East (both host US military base in their country). They are both comparable as both have the same political and social systems as they shared monarchy system (national decision-making is within the royal elite circle) and they are Sunni-majority countries.

Despite the common features, in recent years, both countries had clearly shown different pattern of regional alignment. This is clearly seen through the internal diplomatic crisis of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which happened once in 2014 and is currently happening again (started last year, 2017). In this sense, Qatar and UAE had displayed quite contrasting pattern of regional alignment. Qatar displayed

more complex alignment of behavior by aligning themselves with unpopular choices such as Israel and Iran. While UAE in most of the time ally with the regional power; Saudi Arabia. This paper is comprised of three main sections; the first section will deal with the theories and concepts relating to small state's intra-regional alignment. The second section traces the motives and patterns by going through historical timeline of both countries. The final section will provide the analysis of the drivers for the alignment patterns. This paper concludes that different intra-regional alignment patterns are driven by a combination of factors namely external power dynamic, Iran-Saudi rivalry, and survival of the ruling monarchs.

## 2.0 Small State's Intra-Regional Alignment

Realist scholars have outlined the main patterns of weak state's behavior and the option it has in dealing with big powers. Upon the premise that small state is "*a state that has a deficit of power due to its limited ability to mobilize resources, which could be material, relational or normative*", small states are bounded to choose between two general orientations in their security policy: ally with the threat, or ally against the threat. By choosing one of these options, small states could gain protection or security, but they lose their autonomy. On the other hand, small states may opt to stay neutral to keep its sovereignty but on the expense of its security. An alternative is to hedge; being ambiguous to maximize gains and mitigate risks especially in the future (Rickli, 2016). However, not many has clearly investigated the matter in the context of Middle East where the phenomena of intra-regional alignment occurred. The context of Middle East points out that alliance does not necessarily happen only within the international landscape (with big powers), but it also happens within a certain region. In this sense, two different perspectives could be observed.

The first perspective, which represents the realist school of thought is the discourse written by Walt (1987). In his book, *The Origins of Alliances* he argued that "*states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone*" (p.5). Walt's argument is a revision of realist's earlier argument that the weaker states ally against (balance) or ally with (bandwagon) other states based on power calculation. He proposed that instead of power, weaker states' alignment choice is based on who posed greater threat to them. Four factors are listed as determinants of threat posed by a state; aggregate power (states with the greater total resources pose higher threat), geographic proximity (nearby states pose higher threat), offensive power (states with larger offensive capabilities pose higher threat), and aggressive intentions (states perceived to have aggressive intention pose higher threat).

In Walt's view, "*ideology is less powerful than balancing as a motive for alignment*". Morgenthau's term, *ideological solidarity*, which refers to states sharing political, cultural, or other traits, are deemed as being possibly divisive rather than promoting alliance among states. Ideology may only be a strong motive for alliance when states feel more secure. Walt contends that the impact of ideology on determining alignment choice is exaggerated. But ideology may be considered as a threat hence also becoming a factor of alliance. Therefore, in the case of Middle East, for example, Saudi Arabia aligned with Iraq in 1980 to balance against Iranian revolutionary's ideological threat (Gause, 1999).

The second perspective is based on the constructivist's school of thought. (Lebovic, 2004) in a rebuttal article to Walt, argued that ideology plays more important role in driving state's alignment rather than power or threat, as assumed by the realists. According to Lebovic, "*realists rely upon the 'logic of consequences' by which behavior is driven by (state) preferences and payoffs*", while "*constructivists rely upon the 'logic of appropriateness' by which action involves 'fulfilling the obligations of a role in a situation' and 'stems from a conception of necessity, rather than preference'*" (p.169).

In the case of Arab countries, Lebovic argued that "*the conflict with Israel dominated the alignments of key regional actors into the 1970s*" (p.172). Lebovic posits that the conflict with Israel had created

normative consideration in shaping the behavior of Arab leaders. These leaders “appear to have overcome their differences by pledging support for the hardline policies of other Arab leaders and taking a tough stance toward Israel”. But this was true only during the period where the conflict with Israel and pan-Arabism ideology were at peak in the Middle East. As Lebovic put it, Arab states’ “alignments lost coherence thereafter when pan-Arab ideology faded in importance” (p.173). Based on his study, the conclusion that could be drawn out is that “Arab alliances formed when participants balanced against a threat from Israel”, and on the other hand they “bandwagoned with the ideological threats posed by the most enthusiastic members of the alliance” (p.186). These theoretical perspectives provide a base to understand and analyze Qatar’s and UAE’s regional alignment choice. The upcoming section would elaborate the brief historical evolution and current events with a focus on similarities and differences for alignment choice between the two gulf countries.

### 3.0 Evolution of Qatar & UAE’s Regional Alignment

The evolution of both countries’ regional alignment could be observed in four different phases according to the regional political context. The first phase is the foundational phase from 1970s to 1980s, when Gulf countries were newly given independence from British. The second phase is the intervention phase from 1990s to 2000s, which external power, United States intervened directly in regional affairs and prompted both countries to start showing different patterns of behavior. The third phase is the revolution phase from 2010 to 2013. During this phase, the whole Middle East was swept with wind of revolution, pushing both countries to more intense alignment choices. Finally, the fourth phase is the post-revolution phase when the short-lived revolutionary change in some countries had stalled, and both Qatar and UAE were either ‘trapped’ or leveraged on their position during the revolution years. Qatar and UAE are both prominent states within the category of weak Gulf states in the region of Middle East. In this region, since British declared independence to the Gulf states in the early 1970s until 2003, the weak Gulf states had to juggle their choice of regional alignment between three regional powers: Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. In doing so, generally the Gulf states share similar pattern of aligning themselves with the most ‘like-minded’ in term of political system (monarchy); Saudi Arabia (Rosman-Stollman 2004), with Qatar being an exceptional case in most times.

However, the pattern was not always a clear-cut case of either balancing or allying with the regional powers. In fact, often, weak Gulf states tend to balance and counterbalance at the same time, a behavior called by some as omnibalancing or hedging. In the middle of the regional complex alignment pattern, Israel plays the role of ‘middle man’ that is not a particularly sought after ally, or neither an eternal enemy, yet Gulf states look at it according to their interests and pressure they face internally (Rosman-Stollman, 2004). In 1970s and 1980s, Gulf states who had just gained independence from British, having minimal internal and external security, has chosen the safest and easiest way to survive at that time by acknowledging Saudi Arabia as one of the regional power (Kristian Coates Ulrichsen 2017). By doing so, at least in the case of Qatar, one big threat – Saudi Arabia – has been averted (Roberts et al. 2016). Gulf states in this period also behave similarly by balancing against Israel. Gulf states showed their commitment in Israeli-Palestinian conflict politically and channeled foreign aid to Palestine. UAE together with Qatar initiated a boycott towards Israel in 1973, which made all Gulf states refused to sell oil to the states that are supporting Israel. Their anti-Israeli stance is actually also a showcase of balancing against Iran, especially for the case of UAE which felt more vulnerable towards Iranian coercion at that time (Rosman-Stollman, 2004).

Generational change within the ruling monarchs happened during the end of 1990s and early 2000s in both Qatar and UAE. In Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani replaced his father in a palace coup in 1995. In UAE, the sons of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan have been taking governmental responsibilities as Sheikh Zayed for some period before his death in 2004 and succeeded by his son Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed (Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 2012). This period marked a diverging path for

both UAE and Qatar in their regional policies. In this period and afterwards, UAE showed similar pattern to other Gulf states like Kuwait and Bahrain by generally anchoring their external policies to Saudi's preference. Militarily, this means allying with US as a big power with large military capability. When Taliban regime took over Afghanistan in 1996, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan are the only three countries that had recognized the regime (Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 2017). This is also the case in political domain, where UAE strengthen its relationship with Iraq to balance against Iran (Rosman-Stollman, 2004).

Yet, Qatar stood out and showed different behavior in many cases. In fact, they are considering Israel as their possible ally (in 1996), in contrary to other Gulf states' stands. This is done under the rule of new Emir who internally was seeking to build his political legitimacy and win respect of the people of Qatar. Other than that, the new Emir also introduced numerous domestic reforms and launched Al-Jazeera, the renown media company. Saudi Arabia clearly felt resentful and alienated with these 'boldness' shown by Qatar, while other Gulf states interpret Qatar's move as *bandwagoning* or allying with Israel (even though at the same time Qatar actually strengthen its ties with both Iran and Iraq as a form of counter-balancing) (Rosman-Stollman 2004). By utilizing its image of neutrality, Qatar also seeks to play mediating role in conflicts across the region, a role that was traditionally played by Saudi Arabia. Although this was done carefully, Saudi Arabia nonetheless perceived this as a challenge to its influence in the region (Khatib 2013).

The existence of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that was formed in 1981, however, had illustrated some convergence in their alignment choices especially when there is a clear common threat to these oil-rich countries. In the case of Gulf War in 1991, the awareness of great dangers on their autonomy, security, and economy, all Gulf states put aside their differences and formed a coalition to engage militarily in supporting the campaign led by US to stop Iraqi's invasion of Kuwait (Lenderking et al., 2017). As the Arab Spring broke out starting in the end of 2010 onwards, regional uncertainty reached its highest level. The Middle East was clearly seeing a reshuffle on many fronts, especially in term of democratization and increasing significance of the role of society in Arab countries, a shift from the previous climate of authoritarian rule in the region. During this period too, the Middle East saw a change to United States' commitment to provide security and stability in the region.

Qatar took a risky path by choosing its side during the Arab Spring. Qatar has shown full blessing for the Arab Spring. Additionally, Qatar has given its support to one of the most influential social movement in the Middle East – the Muslim Brotherhood – in many countries involved in the Arab Spring especially in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Other than Turkey, this act is highly not favorable by other countries in the Middle East especially Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, and also pro-Iranian actors such as Hezbollah (Roberts et al., 2016; Al Tamamy, 2012). This move by Qatar could be understood as a form of *bandwagoning* with a rising regional power represented by the Islamists movement, which was generally considered a threat to Arab countries-ruling-monarchies.

UAE, on the other hand, clearly chose another path. This is evident in its participation of curbing for the uprising in Bahrain during 2011, together with Saudi Arabia under the flag of Peninsula Shield Force of GCC. Although being a member of GCC and a neighbor of Bahrain, Qatar did not participate in this campaign. Although in Libya, UAE joined the NATO-led coalition supporting the opposition to bring down Gaddafi, this was mainly because of UAE's intention of seeking international leverage and image, especially to its strategic ally, United States (Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 2012). In 2013, most Middle Eastern countries involved with the Arab Spring phenomena found themselves in a big mess in almost all domains: politics, security, and even economy. Except for Tunisia, the rising of Islamists to the stage of power was either being countered or crippling out of resources and capabilities to complete the whole democratization or regime-change process. This caused Qatar's decision during the height of Arab

Spring seemed unpleasant, and simply deemed as a failure in the eyes of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

That year, the ongoing internal crack within GCC became more prominent and heightened. In 2014, Qatar is still being sympathetic to their national threat – Muslim Brotherhood, a rising force during the Arab Spring. UAE together with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha as a show of antagonism towards Qatar (K. C. Ulrichsen, 2017). UAE followed the Saudi's interventionist policy by joining Saudi in war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria starting in September 2014 and in Yemen under the umbrella of Arab Coalition since March 2015 (Ragab, 2017). All this happened while Qatar still maintains its relationship with Muslim Brotherhood and airing controversial news and views through its media, Al-Jazeera.

In 2017, the fracture within the GCC is reaching its peak. Sheikh Tamim, the Emir of Qatar, was published in Qatari website commenting about Hamas as the legitimate representative of Palestinian people and Iran as a big power in the region. Qatar denied this and claimed that the website was hacked. UAE and Saudi Arabia, together with Bahrain and Egypt, announced a boycott in the form of air, land, and sea blockade against Qatar if their demands were not fulfilled by Qatar. The demands are all related to Qatar's 'friendly and supportive' policies towards 'terrorism' in the region. Up to now, Qatar survived the blockade with the help of Turkey and Iran. Apparently, what seemed to be an act of balancing by Saudi and UAE to weaken or diminish the threat they saw in Qatar, was counterproductive. Qatar seems not to be affected and in fact it has given Qatar a new justification for their alignment choice with countries not favored by Saudi-UAE camp in GCC. Turkey has sent more troops to Qatar in a base that was opened through agreement made in 2014 since then (Al-Jazeera, 2017), and Iran has boosted its economic ties with Qatar significantly after the blockade (Tribune, 2018).

#### 4.0 Drivers of Intra-Regional Alignment of Qatar & UAE

An overall analysis towards the evolution of both countries' alignment choice would allow us to understand that there are certain factors that has shaped Qatar and UAE's behavior as weak states in the Gulf area. The most prominent driver is the regional uncertainty created by intervention and later (slow) withdrawal of external powers, mainly from the United States, in the region. For the case of UAE and Qatar, this could be seen initially in the case of Gulf War in 1991 where Saudi's regional power and power capability to protect Gulf states was marred in the eyes of Qatar when Saudi Arabia approved western intervention. (Roberts et al., 2016) said "*the Kingdom's impotence in calling for Western military intervention in the face of the invasion was not only embarrassing but exploded any notion of Saudi Arabia providing Qatar with any vestige of protection*" (p.6).

The change of United States' foreign policy towards Asia under the administration of Obama is also a factor of this regional uncertainty. Rickli (2016) argued that this policy change "*has directly challenged US primacy in the Gulf and its perception by the GCC states*" (p.4) while Szalai (2017) contends that "*the importance of the MENA region (and thus the value of the GCC in US foreign relations) is expected to diminish*" (p.4) due to 'pivot to Asia' doctrine. The second driver is Iran-Saudi's power rivalry in the region. Both countries were vying for regional dominance for an exceedingly long time. Even when there was no external interference in the region, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi had forced the small states in the Middle East to make hard decisions to protect their own national interest.

In the case of UAE, choosing to take side with Saudi in most of the time was not a complicated choice to make. UAE did not share any direct border with Iran hence having less reason to be aligned with Iran (however, they do trade with Iran). But in the case of Qatar who is destined to share border and natural resource reservoir (the largest natural gas reservoir in the region) with Iran, alienating Iran by aligning completely to Saudi is not really a good choice to make (Kurdli, 2017). Apart from the geographical

facts, there is also the factor of leader's aspiration and ambition in facing the power rivalry between Iran and Saudi. When the United States' presence is decreasing in Middle East (during Obama's era), Saudi Arabia and Iran understood that this power-security vacuum in the region is an opportunity for them to reestablish their position in the region. Both countries use the opportunity to lure the small states within their circle of influence. UAE and other Gulf states' leaders were less risk-taking. They took the path they knew earlier before US came; endorse Saudi Arabia as the regional leader and together they could accumulate strength to balance against the expansionist, Iran. Meanwhile, the aspiring state like Qatar saw this as a chance to magnify their position as an important stakeholder in any affairs in the region. Therefore, they were trying to leverage on both regional power's eagerness to maximize Qatar's benefits and mitigate what Qatar perceives as risks.

The third driver is the political legitimacy or survival of the ruling monarchs. In the end, all politics are local, hence domestic legitimacy lies at the heart of most alignment decisions made by Qatar and UAE. In many instances, this factor hides under the mask of ideological or rhetorical sentiments, which according to constructivists, became the source of alignment with other countries who shared the same idea. But ideology has repeatedly been used by the ruling monarchies of both countries (and other Gulf states) to justify their act of alignment with regional powers. Gulf states aligning together in supporting and financing Palestinian resistance in 1970s, riding the wave of 'anti-Israeli' sentiment that was trending in the Middle East at that time, was in fact a form of indirect balancing against Iranian influence, which has a good relationship with Israel during the period (Rosman-Stollman, 2004).

The changes of Qatar's foreign policy from aligning with Saudi Arabia to adventurous-hedging-policies under Sheikh Hamad, which were against the trend in the Gulf area, was initially a strategy to consolidate his power and garner domestic political strength after the palace coup and threat of the ousted Emir being reinstated in Qatar (Rosman-Stollman, 2004). Saudi Emirati alliance intervening in Yemen and Bahrain is not really a matter of curbing the influence of Shiite in its ideological form. Rather, it is a form of balancing against the threat of Iran, which they perceived as sowing the seed of regime change in their own countries and in the countries they intervened (Ragab, 2017). UAE's tough actions on Muslim Brotherhood, along with Saudi Arabia, is not out of fear for different strand of Islamic ideology that is adopted by Muslim Brotherhood (fundamentalist moderate Islam). Although it is contrary to the Salafism Islam being subscribed and propagated nationally in the countries, the root of cause for their concern is more about the ability of Muslim Brotherhood to lead the social movement which pushes for political and social reforms and wider space of participation (or democratization) in their country and in the neighboring country. Therefore Muslim Brotherhood is considered as a national threat, and even a security threat for Gulf states, according to Dubai head of police in 2012 (Ragab, 2017).

## 5.0 Conclusion

The intra-regional alignment behavior of Qatar and UAE as small states in Middle East proves that even in a region where alignments are multi-layered (with intra-regional powers and with international big powers), small states alignment behavior is heavily driven by the intention of minimizing threats, if not to diminish it completely. Such behavior is expected from states that feel vulnerable within the anarchical environment externally. The external threats and uncertainties, however, are selected and faced according to how the ruling elite perceives it. To preserve domestic political legitimacy, threats and alignment choices become the useful cards for the ruling elites to show their authority, performance, and stature to their domestic audience. By understanding the sub-national dynamics is important in investigating small states' choice for their external strategies.

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