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The relations between Qatar and the GCC countries, and the hegemony in the Arab-Persian Gulf

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“The relations between Qatar and the GCC countries, and the hegemony in the Arab–Persian Gulf.”

MA Thesis, Middle Eastern Studies

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To my parents, Theodoros and Sofia, for supporting me throughout my studies and
life.

Abstract

This thesis explores the Gulf region's complex power and hegemonic dynamics, focusing on the intra-GCC relations, the role of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf, the Qatar Crisis (2017-2020), and Qatar's strategic positioning amidst the blockade imposed by its neighboring countries. The study contributes to the existing literature on the Arab-Persian Gulf power and hegemony by underscoring Qatar's efforts to redefine its role and influence in a region characterized by power struggles and shifting alliances and how Qatar is resisting the Saudi hegemonic shadow. Ultimately, this research not only addresses the immediate implications of the crisis but also offers insights into the broader theoretical frameworks of constructivism and hegemony in international relations. Utilizing Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA), the research examines how Qatar constructs its identity in contrast to the blockade-imposing nations, portraying itself as a victim of injustice while simultaneously highlighting the moral failings of its adversaries. The analysis is grounded in a comprehensive coding process facilitated by Atlas.ti software, categorizing discourse into distinct groups. The findings reveal that Qatar's narrative emphasizes its resilience and agency, framing its international relations through the lenses of soft power and collective identity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Gulf region has long been a focal point of geopolitical interest, characterized by its rich natural resources, strategic maritime routes, and complex inter-state relationships. Among the states in this region, Qatar has emerged as a significant player, particularly in the context of regional mediation and the Gulf Crisis that unfolded between 2017 and 2020. This crisis highlighted the intricate dynamics of power and hegemony within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This thesis explores how hegemony is formed in the Gulf and how Qatar is resisting it. In order to achieve that, this thesis examines how Qatar navigated this crisis, focusing on its self-perception, portrayal of other states, and the broader implications for regional hegemony. Through that, this paper argues that in the Gulf there is a long forming hegemonic shadow, by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and attempts to show how Qatar is resisting and challenging the Saudi hegemonic tendencies.

The backdrop of the Qatari relations with the rest of the states in the area is essential for understanding the power dynamics in the Arab-Persian Gulf, as well as the motivations and actions behind the Qatar Crisis. The blockading countries ostensibly justified the blockade as a means to combat terrorism and promote regional stability. However, Qatar viewed the blockade as an unjust act aiming to undermine its sovereignty and foreign policy independence. This perception of victimhood became a central theme in Qatar's discourse during the crisis, shaping its narrative and diplomatic strategies. By employing Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA), this research seeks to unpack the layers of meaning embedded in Qatar's official statements and communications, revealing how the state constructed its identity in opposition to its adversaries.

The methodology employed in this thesis to examine the Qatar Crisis is grounded in a systematic approach to discourse analysis, which involves collecting and coding relevant documents. The corpus for this analysis consists of official statements, speeches, and interviews from Qatari officials, including the Amir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The selection of these documents was guided by their relevance to the research questions, ensuring a focused examination of the discourse surrounding the crisis. The coding process, facilitated by Atlas.ti software, allowed for the identification

of salient themes and patterns within the texts, providing a foundation for the subsequent analysis.

The key research questions guiding this thesis are: “How is hegemony defined in the Gulf and what is the role of the Qatar Crisis (2017-2021)?”, “How is Qatar trying to escape the Saudi hegemony in the Gulf and how does that affect their relations?”, and “How did Qatar use discursive mechanisms to maintain power throughout the Gulf Crisis?” To answer these questions, it is crucial to explore sub-questions that delve into the intra-GCC relations, and the relations with Iran, Qatar's self-perception, as well as its policies and strategy, its view of other states, and its positioning and handling of the 2017 blockade. The analysis will reveal how Qatar positioned itself and simultaneously how it differentiated between the blockading countries and the international community.

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate context of the Qatar Crisis. It will contribute to the existing literature on Gulf hegemony by addressing the often-overlooked dynamics of intra-GCC relations and Qatar’s role. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the complexities of Qatar's position within the GCC and its attempts to assert its agency in the face of regional pressures have received less focus. This thesis aims to fill this gap by providing a nuanced analysis of Qatar's foreign policy strategies and the implications for regional power dynamics.

Furthermore, the findings of this research have broader implications for understanding the role of discourse in international relations. Constructing identity through language and narrative is a powerful tool for states seeking to influence perceptions and garner support. Qatar's ability to frame its narrative as one of resilience and moral high ground in the face of adversity underscores the importance of soft power in contemporary geopolitics. By examining the interplay between discourse and power, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how states navigate crises and assert their positions within the international system.

In conclusion, the Qatar Crisis serves as a critical case study for examining the complexities of power, identity, and discourse in the Arab-Persian Gulf region. This thesis seeks to illuminate the broader dynamics of hegemony and resistance within the GCC through a detailed analysis of Qatar's responses to the blockade. By employing a

rigorous methodological framework and engaging with key theoretical concepts, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of Gulf politics and the role of discourse in shaping state behavior, particularly focusing on hegemony. As the region continues to grapple with the implications of the crisis and the shifting of power balances, understanding the narratives constructed by states like Qatar will be essential for comprehending the future trajectory of Gulf relations and the quest for regional stability.

Keywords: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, GCC, Hegemony, Arab–Persian Gulf.

Chapter 2: Literature Review, Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Literature review

This research will elucidate the complex subsystem of the Gulf, focusing on the relations between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the power balances in the Gulf, and their struggle for dominance. A subsystem is defined in dictionaries as “a system that forms part of a larger system.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2024) (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2024). The question that arises is, “How does this translate into international relations?”. Per Özdemir, the international system consists of units larger than actors, whose relations construct the general system and its structure. These units are recognized as subsystems or regional systems. Subsystems possess systemic qualities and actor-like capabilities, something that allows them to uphold the existing structure while, at the same time, they can instigate transformative dynamics (Özdemir 2017). The identity of subsystems as regional systems and their importance in the Middle East are also highlighted by Fred Halliday in his book “The Middle East in International Relations” (Halliday 2010).

This paper will contribute to the existing literature, as it is evident that current research centers around the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran regarding power dynamics and hegemony in the Gulf. Some examples of the titles that are found among others during the research are “The Iranian–Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry” (D. Fathollah-Nejad 2017), “Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf” (Jahner 2012), “What are the Limits of Iran-Saudi Détente?” (Heiran-Nia 2023), and “Review: Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends, Rivals or Foes in Geopolitical Flux” (Mabon 2017). However, it is essential to understand that Qatar should not be left out of the equation. Being a sub-system of the Middle East, the Gulf fosters different perspectives on power and dominance. This means that we should not approach or analyze those elements based solely on the major actors or some of the actors in this system. This thesis will approach this complex sub-system from the Qatari point of view, a state that weighs heavily on regional power balances yet is often kept out of the spotlight where questions of hegemony are concerned.

During the research and writing process of the “Historical Background” chapter, it became clear very early that there are a few gaps in the existing literature when it comes to intra-GCC relations. There are plenty of sources on the ties between Qatar-USA, Saudi Arabia-USA, Qatar-Iran, Qatar-Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia-Iran, but a lot less regarding the relations of Qatar with the rest of the GCC countries and between them. Something else that is noticed quite a lot is the fact that there are publications on the development of these states. Still, their relations are rarely discussed, especially Qatar’s relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.

Qatar has attracted attention to be studied, but only to an extent and in particular aspects. Specifically, there have been many publications over the years about Qatar and its economy and development, as well as about Qatar and its policies and role in the “Arab Spring.” In the most recent ones, the focus seems to have shifted significantly to the 2017 crisis, Qatar’s response, and the Qatari-Saudi dynamics. Driven by the recent wave of research on the Qatar crisis, Qatar became a prominent subject of research and discussions on the country’s position and role in the Arab-Persian Gulf. However, it is evident that the focus was still mainly on the 2017 blockade, and any pre-2017 research focuses primarily on political reform, urbanization, and energy. Some of the titles found are: “Political Reform in the Gulf: The Case of Qatar” (Rathmell and Schulze 2000), “Political reform in the Gulf monarchies: from liberalisation to democratisation: A comparative perspective” (Nonneman 2006), “Rapid urban development and national master planning in Arab Gulf countries: Qatar as a case study” (Rizzo 2014), “The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis And The Politics Of Energy” (Rende 2015), and “Qatar, Energy Security, and Strategic Vision in a Small State” (Miller 2020).

When it comes to the main topic of this thesis, the hegemony in the Gulf and Qatar’s attempt to escape it and possibly change the existing status quo, it is very clear that even though there is much research on the Gulf and the power balances in the area, it is only during and after the Qatar crisis in 2017 that more people focused on the Saudi goals to establish a dominant status and Qatar’s will to escape the Saudi shadow and turn over the balances. The richest literature findings were found on the Qatar crisis and the attempts to be resolved. Some of the titles of research focused on hegemony in the Gulf and Qatar’s role are: “Qatar and Omnibalancing Escaping the Saudi Regional Hegemony” (Bitar 2020), “Hegemony, Dependence and Development in the Gulf”

(Said Zahlan 1980), and “The soft power–soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar” (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018).

2.2. Theoretical framework

Constructivism in international relations focuses on human cognizance, how it plays out in the field of global politics and international relations, and how it affects them. Human cognizance is determined by the human identity, which is formed and shaped by societal values, norms, history, and institutions (McClelland and Pfaltzgraff 2024). This theory emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviors. Scholars of constructivism argue that the international system is nothing but a creation of humans that consists of ideas and principles. Constructivists tend to focus on the intersubjectivity and shared beliefs of ideologies and on how relations are shaped, developed, and expressed (Jung 2019). Constructivism does not disregard the fact that the world is made from physical entities. However, it is based on the notion that the ideas, beliefs, and the way these entities are translated into collective consciousness are what matters the most. Moreover, it studies how social, political, and financial ties are formed and maintained, despite the existing social differences (Jackson, Robert; Sorensen, Georg 2006, Williams 2024).

For constructivists, a confrontation is defined as a conflict or disagreement that stems from miscommunication or a misunderstanding, highlighting the importance of discourse and interpretation in international relations. This means that they don't give to confrontation the usual attributes of entities or actors clashing. In order for these confrontations to be understood and analyzed, with the constructivist approach, one should employ discourse analysis of public speech (Jackson, Robert; Sorensen, Georg 2006). Constructivists contend that agency and structure interplay, meaning they have the ability to influence each other. Agency is viewed as someone's ability to act, while the international system constitutes the structure (Theys 2018). Conventional constructivism focuses on posing 'what' questions, whereas critical constructivism poses 'how' questions. This approach is closer to how this thesis will approach this topic and research.

Even though constructivism seems to be stating simple and apparent observations, it comes with specific implications when applied. The problem with using constructivism in international relations is that it implies that nothing is certain,

everything is liquid, as immutable laws do not govern international relations, and there is no inevitability in international politics. By accepting that reality, however, the states can change their perception of their identity, goals, and interests whenever and however they see fit. The problem here lies in the fact that, if the aforementioned theory gets implemented, it will abolish international anarchy as it is known and accepted in the present. Methodologically, constructivism has a divided profile. The fact that a theory focuses on intersubjectivity positions it in post-positivism, but at the same time, the importance of scientific interpretation, for constructivists, classifies it also in positivism (Jackson, Robert; Sorensen, Georg 2006).

The theory of constructivism has received several critiques, which have highlighted the theory's limitations. These critiques could be divided into methodological, empirical, and theoretical issues. According to many scholars, constructivism relies heavily on qualitative analysis, which leads to the lack of empirical testability. Another issue of the constructivist approach is its limited ability to be generalizable, as it is usually based on specific case studies. Constructivism's inability and limitation in making specific and broad predictions has also been a focal point in its criticism (Adler 2013). Another problematic point of constructivism in international relations is that this theory is hyper-focused on norms, identities, and intersubjectivity that may result in neglecting the role and importance of power in world politics (Palan 2000; Guzzini and Leander 2005).

Some of the most prominent scholars who have contributed significantly to the debate on constructivism in international relations are Alexander Wendt, Nicholas Onuf, Emanuel Adler, Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, Friederich Kratochwil, and Peter Katzenstein. Wendt's work has been central to the development of constructivism in international relations, focusing on the structure of the international system being composed of shared ideas and norms (Lezaun 2002, Behravesch 2011). Onuf was the scholar who introduced the term "constructivism" in the theory of international relations in 1989, emphasizing human action in creating social facts (Behravesch 2011). Adler positions constructivism as a middle ground between rationalism and interpretivism (Cristol 2019). Finnemore and Sikkink have explored how norms and ideas influence state actions, identities, and international policies (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). Kratochwil has contributed to the development of the constructivist approach to understanding international law and governance (Cristol 2019). Last,

Katzenstein has focused on how national security policies can be influenced by culture and norms (Cristol 2019).

2.2.1. The term “Arab–Persian Gulf”

Before we move forward, it is indispensable to clarify why the chosen term for the area is “Arab–Persian Gulf” and not the widely used term “Persian Gulf.” As it is widely known in international relations and area studies, the Gulf is a geographic region claimed by eight countries, from which only one is a Persian state while the rest are Arab states. This has resulted in a more significant debate in the fields of international relations and geopolitics, as both sides name it differently. Even though the term “Persian Gulf” has been dominant in global discourse, the side of the Arab states who claim it as the “Arabian/Arab Gulf” should not be overlooked. The choice of using both terms is deliberate since I do not wish, as the author of this research, to partake in this debate. So, for the neutrality of this paper, the region here will be referred to either as the “Arab–Persian Gulf” or “Gulf.”

2.2.2. The term “hegemony”

Hegemony has been mainly associated with the Italian school, but was also used across debates by Russian Marxists, fitting a precise description, usually referring to “world domination” (Goldstein, *Power Politics* 1999). The term was used and further developed especially by Antonio Gramsci, who came up with a fusion of the meanings used by Russian and Italian Marxists (Martin 2023). Gramsci describes hegemony, or “predominance by consent”, as a state where a dominant class assumes a leading role politically, intellectually, and or morally in the context of a hegemonic system, which is characterized by a common world-view or an “organic ideology” (Valeriano 1982). In a more state-centered view of international relations, hegemony indicates the existence of a dominant state or a dominant group of states (Rosamond 2024). According to Gramsci’s definition, rulers aim to gain consent for their legitimacy and thus stay in power (Goldstein 1999). Based on Gramsci’s work, the term “hegemony” in this paper will be approached as a form of soft power. Hegemony as soft power involves the capacity to ‘manufacture consent’. In that sense, hegemony implies the position of social, political, and particularly ideological spheres in ascending order. As a soft power, hegemony arises when the powerful or the dominant country of the class has the power to win the consent of dominated classes by persuading them to view the

world in a manner favorable to the ascendancy of the dominant class. The behavior of the weaker countries is influenced in ways that favor the interests of the most powerful country (unacademy 2024).

An interesting theory that is connected to the way hegemony is approached in this thesis, is the Hegemonic Stability Theory, whose founder is considered to be Charles Kindleberger (Guzzini 2001). Based on the Hegemonic Stability Theory, *“when one state’s power is predominant, it can enforce rules and norms unilaterally, avoiding the collective goods problem. [...] hegemony may be crucial in establishing regimes but it’s not necessary for maintaining them.”* (Goldstein, *Alternatives to Power Politics* 1999). In this framework, a hegemon state is not fearing the existing competition from other states, but rather its main concern is that what itself is offering, as an exceptional good, will be excluded from the competition in other states. And since hegemony does not guarantee that this ‘hegemon state’ will maintain its position and influence, the aforementioned fear becomes the driving force for further actions and discourses to achieve that.

2.3. Methodology

As mentioned previously, for the core of the second part of this thesis the method of Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA) will be employed. For the sake of this paper the Intertextual Research Models chosen are Hansen’s model 1, “Official Discourse” and model 2, “Wider Foreign Policy Debate” (*Figure 1*) (Hansen 2006).

Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis will be carried out in four steps. The first one is collecting and selecting sources and creating the corpus of documents that will be the primary material of this analysis. The second step is the reading and re-reading process, where the main goal is to familiarize oneself with the language, the style, and the discourse of the files comprising the corpus. Following the in-depth reading of the documents comes the third step where the coding process takes place, which will be done using the Atlas.ti software. The fourth and final step is the analysis of the codes, which will result in the composition of the body text of the corresponding sub-chapter.

After the first step, as expected, the number of documents for my corpus was a bit larger than the final corpus. However, during the reading stage and going through the material at hand, the decision to exclude the less relevant documents was made since

they did not respond to the research questions. The final corpus of this discourse analysis consists of thirty-five documents, all of which are official statements of the Qatari government and speeches or interviews by the Amir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The sources used to gather these documents were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar (MOFA), the Government Communications Office of Qatar (GCO), and the UN General Debate of the General Assembly. The collection of the material was relatively easy and very accessible. The sources have everything provided in English, so it wasn't necessary to translate them myself as it was initially expected. However, that means there is a high chance that meanings can be slightly lost in translation from Arabic to English, even though it is an official translation.

The research design is based on Hansen's design (*Figure 2*) (Hansen 2006). For this discourse analysis, the research design was morphed as such: the topic of study is "The Qatar Crisis 2017-2020", with the main focus being on how Qatar viewed itself in this blockade. The number of selves is two, "Qatar" and the "Blockade-imposing countries", the intertextual models are "Official" and "Foreign Policy", the temporal perspective is the period from 2017 to 2020, and the number of events is one, which is stretched in a period (*Figure 3*).

2.3.1. Coding

The coding process constitutes the basis of this part of the thesis and thus is the most time-demanding part. Before the coding process, there is the step of "Reading and Re-reading". Here time is utterly dedicated to the texts, reading through them once to get a general idea of their contents and get acclimated to the language used and the style of it. On the second time of reading, the aim is to get familiarized with the information and start taking notes and highlighting crucial information, phrases, and words.

However, starting the coding process was not as easy as expected and at first there were a lot of questions at hand, mainly on how to start coding and how to create codes that will give the best results possible. My guiding question was "Who is talked about and how?" (Warnaar 2023), which kept me focused and in line with the wanted results of this stage. The coding of the first two documents took significantly longer than the rest of the corpus, as it became clearer what I should look for in the texts after the first documents. Despite the considerable number of documents collected, saturation was starting to become evident after the first nine documents were coded.

While continuing the coding process, very few things were added to the existing codes and predicates, and most of the information was just a repetition of what was already coded. This is where I could start recognizing the most salient codes, providing me with the baseline for the analysis to come, which is important as salience shows the centrality of a code to the production of meaning (Warnaar 2023). Two factors of high significance when it comes to the process of salience are intertextuality and connotations. Recognizing connotations between two different codes is not always easy. However, it is gratifying for the analysis, as these connotations are able to add a lot of strength to the meaning of a predicate.

The coding process was done with the use of the Atlas.ti software, as mentioned earlier. When the coding process began, I had more than twelve codes and by the end of coding, I ended up with two code groups and five codes. The shrinkage of the number of codes is a result of getting familiarized with the process of coding. It became clear that some codes needed to be merged. Thus, the final product of coding is the two groups, which are “Subjects”, that includes the codes “Qatar” and “Blockade-imposing countries” and “Observers”, which contains the codes “Friendly countries” and “International community”. Outside of these groups, there is another code, named “people under occupation”. The codes were created based on the criteria of “who is it talked about”, and not of “how”, because then they would have yielded a significantly large number of codes for the predicates for each subject that was talked about. This is not necessarily something negative, but it would not have been convenient for my approach.

Closing the coding subchapter is essential to reflect on the coding process and acknowledge gaps and mistakes that should be avoided in future discourse analyses. While stepping into the analysis stage of this research, it became very clear that a more well-organized and structured coding system would be way more helpful and practical. This could have been achieved through coding based both on “who” is talked about and “how”, and not relying solely on one of them, while building a code grouping system for the predicates of each subject.

2.3.2. Analysis

During the analysis, the identity construction process takes place and the tools to construct and identify the subjects and their identities are the processes of

juxtapositioning and linking and differentiation, by Hansen. Linking and differentiation are perceived as a way to theorize the constitution of the Self and the Other. Another way of theorization is through the articulation of spatial, temporal, and ethical identity. The process of linking is a positive process through which the different elements that constitute the identity of a subject are connected and most often they attribute to the subject positive characteristics. The process of differentiation is usually characterized as a negative process as it juxtaposes the Self and the Other(s), usually giving the Other negative elements (Hansen 2006). In these processes, binaries have a very crucial role, as they construct simultaneously both identities of the Self and the Other. Per Derrida, meaning is established by juxtapositions, where elements are valued based on their opposites (Derrida 1976) (Derrida 1978). Using this approach should come with the acceptance of the fact that this meaning can be destabilized if the discourse at hand changes.

The stage of the analysis turned out to be a significantly easier process since the language used in the corpus was pretty straightforward and indicative. For this part of the thesis to be as conclusive and easy to read as possible, the codes for the two subjects were analyzed in parallel, while the rest of the codes were analyzed individually. This facilitates the process of understanding the subject positioning and the juxtapositions taking place. At the same time, it allows the rest of the codes to be analyzed sufficiently and in complete focus, without getting sidelined by the more extensive codes.

In the analysis stage, the answers to some of the research questions are formed and extracted, and PDA is an efficient method to provide the answers. The main research questions seeking answers through the Discourse analysis are “How is Qatar trying to escape the Saudi hegemony in the Gulf and how does that affect their relations?”, and “How did Qatar use discursive mechanisms to maintain power throughout the Gulf Crisis?”. To fully answer this, however, it is helpful to first answer the sub-questions “How did Qatar see itself?”, “How did Qatar see other states?”, and “How did Qatar see the conflict?”. And these sub-questions constitute the baseline of the analysis.

Chapter 3: Qatar and the GCC countries, historical Background

In this chapter, follows a brief overview of the ties between Qatar and the rest of the GCC countries. Doha's relations with the other countries have been through several stages, from friendly to just co-operative to hostile. The Arab Uprisings of 2011, that so ironically were named as "The Arab Spring", also have had a very significant impact on regional dynamics and they have marked a new historical era for the Middle East. The intra-GCC relations of course were not left unscathed, and they will be reviewed below. At this point, it is crucial to mention that some sub-chapters are significantly smaller than others, because of the lack of sources about their relations over the years. This chapter serves as a way to provide the thesis and the reader with a background and set a foundation for the chapters to follow.

3.1. Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have a variety of characteristics in common, like their ethnicity, language, culture, and religion, they are both Sunni, Hanbali/Wahhabi, states (Bilgin 2018; Dorsey 2013). Moreover, they share borders, are rentier states, are non-democratic, and are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Considering the above, one would think that these states should get along pretty well. In reality, it could be said more easily that Qatar and Saudi Arabia have a past full of turbulent relations (Islam 2023), something that can be observed in the present as well, and something that was even more evident after the Arab Uprisings of 2011. Despite their shared identities, Doha and Riyadh do not share common interests in politics and international relations, and their differences have shown from quite early. A prime example of these different interests is the relation each of them have with Iran, who for Saudi Arabia is perceived as its biggest threat, while Qatar has friendly ties with it. Both countries operate based on regime survival policies.

If we could somehow classify the causes of tensions between Riyadh and Doha into categories, they would be formed as such, the Al Jazeera Media Network, the ties of Qatar to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the rather friendly relations between Doha and Tehran. Of course, looking back to the history of these countries, there are other

events, unrelated to the aforementioned topics, that have played their role in their bilateral relations. However, these three seem to be the most often to spark tensions.

Taking a brief look to the past, Riyadh had laid a claim to Qatar, which did not make an excellent start for their relations, but things really escalated in 1992 when a border dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar resulted in a Saudi assault against the border security point (Bilgin 2018) (Islam 2023). This dispute was finally settled in 2001 (BBC World Service Newsroom 2001). Another example of their shaky relations was in 1995, when Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani came to power in Qatar instead of his father, something that Riyadh did not welcome and even tried to undermine his rule, overthrow him, and sabotage the Qatari efforts to export gas (Bilgin 2018; Dorsey 2013). The way the succession of rulers, in Qatar, has played out over the years was not welcomed by the Saudi Kingdom, since for the Saudis a ruler holds their position until their passing (Dorsey 2013).

The Arab Uprisings in 2011 have had a tremendous impact on the Qatari–Saudi relations. Doha and Riyadh viewed the uprisings as an opportunity to expand their influence zones in the region, as well as in the Arab world generally. The Saudi objective was to expand and impose its policies on Qatar, but Qatar’s main goal was to persuade its own interests and aspirations, viewing the revolts as the perfect opportunity to increase its influence in the area and acted on it by providing economic, military, and media support to the revolutionaries, aiding their cause of taking down some of the authoritarian Arab regimes (Bilgin 2018). Meanwhile, the Saudi government was worried over the uprisings and the possibility of them reaching its borders.

During that time, the Saudi and Qatari governments supported different groups and, more often than not, rival ones. The only case, where they both had a similar approach, was the revolts in Bahrain, and the reason why was because, on one hand, having security threats and instability so close to it was not in Qatar’s agenda, and on the other hand, Doha was aware of the possible cost if it was to follow an opposing policy to the rest of the GCC members (Bilgin 2018).

Another event that has stigmatized the Saudi-Qatari relations is when in 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, with the cause claiming to be Qatar’s attempts to meddle with their internal affairs, Qatar’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Al Jazeera Media Network

(Bilgin 2018). And the most recent example of their turbulent bilateral relations is the Gulf Crisis in 2017, and the blockade imposed on Qatar, which will be touched upon in the following chapters.

There is genuine distrust between these two countries, which is the main reason behind why Qatar decided to prioritize its own autonomy and foreign policy and to deviate from the Saudi orbit. Both states, aiming for the dominant role in geopolitics in the Middle East, have tried to mould events and changes to their advantage, especially during the “Arab Spring” which more often than not has led to Doha and Riyadh finding themselves in opposite sides. This could be clearly observed during the Arab upheavals of 2011, but in the Syrian crisis as well (Bilgin 2018). Saudi Arabia’s attention remains focused on the existing status quo, and how it can be maintained, the Islamist movements and how to keep them within bounds, and the monarchical rule and its protection (Dorsey 2013). Qatar’s focus and foreign policy, on the other side, seems to gainsay most of the Saudi objectives, which is precisely what has Riyadh on high alert about its own role and influence, especially since for Riyadh, Qatar is a minute state and thus it is vital for it to follow the Kingdom’s orders. Taking the aforementioned into consideration, the possibility of any future disputes between Saudi Arabia and Qatar does not seem unlikely, and it would most likely come with a heavy impact on regional and international relations.

3.2. Qatar and United Arab Emirates

Qatar and the UAE have always been viewed and regarded as small states, or even “a micro-state” in the case of Qatar (Peterson 2006), and that has put both states in similar positions over the years. For instance, during the 90s both countries were trying to settle territorial disputes with Saudi Arabia. These countries do not seem to consider themselves “small” as their GDPs do not indicate that, and they have both adopted hedging strategies. They share several characteristics, their location and their cultural background, both are Sunni countries, non-democratic rentier states and their economies are heavily reliant on hydrocarbons, and they are both members of the GCC, but as with Saudi Arabia, their commonalities are not enough for them to co-exist in unity (Roberts 2017).

The relations between them have gone through periods of both tensions and cooperation. Before the uprisings of 2011, their relations were characterized by

cooperation, mainly because of their shared GCC membership and their mutual interests in establishing themselves in the Gulf. In the 2000s, they even had an agreement on constructing a causeway, bypassing Saudi territory and connecting the two countries (Miller and Verhoeven 2020). Nevertheless, their decisions to adopt different foreign policy approaches strained this cooperative relation, something that showed during the “Arab Spring”. During that period, there were tensions and differences between Doha and Abu Dhabi, but they both seemed to be at the spearhead of efforts to control and mould the changes and the flow that the uprisings brought. The UAE joined Qatar in its leading efforts to find ‘Arab solutions to Arab problems’ (Ulrichsen 2012). However, Abu Dhabi’s main goal was to expand its influence and impact as a security actor (Miller and Verhoeven 2020; Telci and Horoz 2021) and thus they ended up supporting different, and many times, rival groups (Roberts 2017), which resulted in highlighting their very different approaches to regional security and setting ground for any future rifts. Shortly after, in 2014, Qatar and the UAE went through a period of turbulence, with the Al-Jazeera network being in the center of it (Mirouh 2014).

In the last decades, it is noted that Doha and Abu Dhabi seem to have been following common policies in certain fields, despite the fact that the UAE was following the Saudi trajectory in recent events. They have both expanded their ties with Asian partners, especially in the field of energy and hydrocarbons. They have also found themselves in the same position in 2007, when global food prices spiked, making them face the consequences of being almost entirely reliant on imported food, and they both responded with the same strategy, by investing in agriculture in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australia (Ulrichsen 2012). The Qatari-Emirati relations were recently tested during the Gulf crisis in 2017, when the UAE followed suit the Saudi objectives and discourse, joining Riyadh in the blockade imposed against Doha (Al-Jazeera 2017), but after the reconciliation efforts they seem to be on a good track again.

3.3. Qatar and Oman

As mentioned in the literature review the sources on the Qatari-Omani relations are quite limited. However, what it is known for Qatar and Oman is that these two countries have a few commonalities. They are both non-democratic rentier states, with hydrocarbon economies, and are members of the GCC. Their main difference is their

religion branch, even though both countries have Islam as their official religion, Oman is an Ibadi, mainly, country, but the Sunni population percentage is also quite close (CIA 2024).

Oman is one more country that has found itself amid territorial disputes with Saudi Arabia, during the 20th century and up until 1995. After this period the Omani-Saudi relations have developed smoothly, with Muscat being aligned with Riyadh in many cases. This could have resulted in the creation of frictions in the Qatari-Omani relations, especially during the 2017 Blockade imposed, but Oman's publicly neutral stance was able to maintain and even strengthen its ties to Qatar, under the table (O'Toole 2017). This stirring away from the Saudi policies was not much of a surprise, taking into account the fact that for the last few years Muscat has clearly shown its unwillingness to become yet another satellite state for Riyadh to push its agenda with (Katzman 2016). Overall, Oman's foreign policy and relations are characterized by a general want for maintaining good bilateral relations with its neighbors and not only, prioritizing its security, and acknowledging the need for pragmatic and realistic approaches in the area. When it comes to the Omani-GCC relations, Muscat has made clear that the relations with the rest of the GCC countries are cooperative, but a union is not in its agenda (Yenigun 2017).

3.4. Qatar and Bahrain

The Qatari-Bahraini relations, even though complicated occasionally, are based on their shared characteristics. They are both Sunni countries, even though the majority of the Bahraini population is Shia, they are GCC members, non-democratic rentier states, and their economy is heavily relied on hydrocarbons. Bahrain, like Qatar, is yet another small country in the Gulf area, which is noticed to be following a hedging strategy. There have still been tensions between Qatar and Bahrain, with some of them being attributed to the Al-Jazeera network, with the 2011 example while the Manama protests were unraveling (Mirouh 2014). Even though Manama has found itself in the middle of the Saudi-Iranian competition, it remains close to Riyadh, which was clearly depicted in two cases. On one hand, when in 2012 Bahrain and Saudi Arabia proposed the formation of a union between the GCC states (Hamdi and Salman 2020) and on the other hand, during the 2017 Gulf crisis, when Bahrain aligned its policy with Saudi Arabia (Al-Jazeera 2017), creating tensions in the relations between Doha and Manama.

3.5. Qatar and Kuwait

Kuwait and Qatar share several characteristics because of their nature and society's similarities (Khodr 2014), which constitute the baseline of their relations, often referring to each other as "sister countries" (Al Thani 2019; 2020; 2017). They are both Sunni non-democratic countries, rentier states with a hydrocarbon economy, where petroleum represents over 90% of government income (Al-Khoury 2008), and they are both GCC members. Another commonality is that in the past Kuwait was also in the middle of territorial disputes with Saudi Arabia, as well as maritime disputes (Hamdi and Salman 2020). It is also notable that Kuwait and Doha have followed similar policies for their internal affairs and issues over the years (Khodr 2014).

Kuwait has differentiated itself from Riyadh's policies from time to time, with prime examples of its mediation in the 2014 Qatar Crisis and the 2017 Blockade on Qatar. Kuwait did not partake in the blockade and actually had an active mediating role in resolving the crisis (Sulaib 2020)(Fraihat 2020). The Kuwaiti foreign policy is heavily based on diplomacy and mediation, while also recognizing the Saudi interests within the GCC and actively avoids serving them in many cases¹, which has definitely had a positive impact on the Qatari-Kuwaiti relations. Kuwait's choice of following this path with its foreign policy serves as a way to showcase that even when it is referred to as a "microstate" it actually can make a difference and have an impact on regional disputes and developments. Moreover, Kuwait actually benefitted from the blockade, economically that is, as it pushed Qatar to enhance its commercial ties with Kuwait (Sulaib 2020).

¹ Kuwait did not ratify the GCC's security agreements in 2002 and 2014, as they would serve more the Saudi interests (Hamdi and Salman 2020).

Chapter 4: The Hegemony in the Arab-Persian Gulf

In this chapter hegemony in the Arab-Persian Gulf is being examined. How is it defined, which actors are attempting to establish their influence and dominance, which countries are rivals and how do the rest of the countries react to that? Thus, this chapter analyzes Saudi Arabia's attempts to establish itself as a hegemon and to manufacture consent, especially from smaller states. As is expected, however, this comes with difficulties and states who are competitors. In this case, the main competitor is Iran and then to a more minor degree Qatar. This is why this chapter also delves into the Saudi-Iranian relations as well as the Qatari-Iranian.

4.1. Saudi Arabia's attempts to establish hegemony

To understand Saudi Arabia's attempts and goals, one has to look into how Riyadh views its interests in the context of the Gulf. The Kingdom's way of perceiving threats within the Gulf region is the baseline of how its foreign policy is shaped (Bilgin 2018). These threats regard Saudi Arabia's national security and regime survival and stability. Needless to say, that the Saudi Kingdom views threats entirely different compared to other states in the area, especially the smaller ones. Saudi Arabia, as the dominant state, and its hegemonic "shadow" in the Arab-Persian Gulf has pushed the smaller states to follow its policy lines and cooperate with it over the years (Islam 2023). This was even more intensified with Riyadh's leading role within the GCC (Islam 2023) Returning to the way hegemony is approached in this paper, the aforementioned points constitute the baseline of Saudi Arabia's efforts to manufacture consent in the Gulf, having smaller states influence and agree with its policies.

The degree of importance of the aforementioned threats can be shown by the amount Riyadh spends to its armed forces, which reaches 10% of the country's GDP (Jabbar 2017). For a state that is the largest amongst the GCC members, and is considered to be the most significant power, this investment in its military shows that there is a higher degree of a feeling of insecurity than it seems.

Riyadh's will to expand its ties and influence was shown during 2017 too, with the rapprochement with Baghdad. This move shows that Saudi Arabia might be taking a further look into sectarianism in the area and also is trying to diversify its relations with neighboring countries, perhaps lowering its dependency on the United States of

America (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). This rapprochement decision has also shaken Iran, Riyadh's biggest rival, who has had a dominant reign over Iraq over the years, however that does not mean that the Iranian influence will disappear (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). The exact weight carries Riyadh's decision to come closer with Russia, challenging again Iran's dominance and influence (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017).

The Saudi influence in the Gulf extends further than the regional relations. The Kingdom has a significant impact on the economy, and it has been shown over the years. A significant example is the 1985-1986 oil prices plummeting, after Riyadh flooded the international market with oil. This had showed how powerful Saudi Arabia is in essentially controlling the world oil prices, but also how easily this country can affect the economy of its neighbors (Jahner 2012).

4.2. The Struggle for dominance with Iran

Admittedly the two major powers in the Arab-Persian Gulf are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the world has witnessed it over the course of the years. And this paper would be incomplete without taking a look into the Saudi-Iranian hegemonic competition, which has been a constant struggle for the regional hegemony (Islam 2023). Both countries are autocratic states and often regarded as “*energy titans*” (Sadjadpour 2024), and for a very good reason so. Saudi Arabia and Iran, combined, control a little less of one third of the world's oil reserves (worldometer 2024) and a little more of one fifth of its natural gas (worldometer 2024)².

The Saudi-Iranian relation is characterized by mutual mistrust. Iran has been regarded, for years, by Saudi Arabia as a destabilizing factor in the region and a threat, which was heightened after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The 1979 Revolution was seen as a threat of exporting ideologies, precisely the one of revolutionary Islam (Okruhlik 2003, Crepy 2019)(Islam 2023). Thus, the Saudi Kingdom has for years been attempting to counter the Iranian ambitions and limit Tehran's influence in the area. However, to its disappointment these attempts haven't really been successful. Riyadh has used hard and soft power so far for that goal, as well as financial means without seeing the desired result (Sadjadpour 2024). An example of the Saudi efforts, via the financial route, was the 1985-1986 period, when the Kingdom flooded the market with

² Iran holds 9.5% of the world's oil reserves and 17.3% of natural gas, while Saudi Arabia holds 16.2% of the oil reserves and 4.2% of natural gas.

oil, leading to a plummet of oil prices wounding, this way, incredibly the Iranian economy (Jahner 2012).

For the last, at least 20 years, the hegemonic rivalry and tensions between Riyadh and Tehran are pretty obvious, and slightly altered from what they have been viewed as, turning them into a shaping factor of Middle East's security (Mabon 2017). At the beginning of it, it was predominantly viewed as a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites (Sadjadpour 2024). However, today's form of this détente is more ideological if anything else (Mabon 2017). Both of them want to have the 'upper hand' regarding power and influence in the region, but a power and influence that wouldn't be confined to the Gulf, if possible. The Saudi-Iranian détente in the area is rooted in the several differences they have, culturally, religiously, regionally, and geopolitically, but also on the maximalist positions taken by both sides, that cover a range of topics, such as regional hegemony, nationalism, sectarianism, revolutionary ideology, oil, the U.S. military presence in the Gulf, and even the Hajj (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017, Parry 2022). Another factor that is not always observed is their domestic issues and problems (Parry 2022).

While it is evident that both countries' aspiration is to enforce their hegemony, Tehran's goal to increase its influence, power, and regional power was heightened after 2003, when Saddam Hussein was removed from power. Removing Hussein from Iraq's rule brought new balances to the region, but definitely gave Iran the chance it was waiting to go after its goals (Jahner 2012). Their rivalry was intensified during the 2010s by two factors, first the Arab Uprisings of 2011 and second the attempts of rapprochement between the Iran's and Saudi Arabia's traditional allies in the West (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). In the case of the "Arab Spring", Tehran was quite successful and swift in filling the gaps and power vacuum created by the new forming order, which alarmed Riyadh. The cases of Syria and Iraq have also heavily influenced their relations and competition for power.

The roots of this hegemonic competition can also be found in the Iranian-US relations and their turn after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when Iran started pursuing a more independent policy which resulted in altering, for the worse, not only the Iranian-US relations but also the ties with pro-Western countries, such as Saudi Arabia (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). The relations and approaches between Riyadh and Tehran were

heavily influenced by the changes in the Iranian government, with the stark difference between the Khatami and Ahmadinejad periods. During Khatami's rule, 1997-2005, their relations were characterized by a 'relative friendliness' but when Ahmadinejad came to power, 2005-2013, that was replaced by 'a state of enmity and rivalry' (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). This pattern has been repeated for years, almost ever since the establishment of their ties, gaining the characterization of an “*on-again, off-again relationship*” (Jahner 2012), which also creates a broader sense of uncertainty. The foundation of the GCC in 1981 and the creation of its, in many cases, anti-Iranian agenda did not help in their deteriorating relations. In periods of severed relations between them, each side was looking for a way to undermine the other and witness its downfall (Parry 2022).

When it comes to the geopolitical aspect there are three factors in this rivalry: the sectarian divisions and the leading of the Islamic world, economic interests and oil, and the Gulf's premier power (Jahner 2012, Parry 2022). In the first case, Saudi Arabia is considered the safeguard of Islam and often regarded as the leader country of the Islamic world, in which Riyadh takes great pride, something that has been however challenged by Ayatollah Khomeini, who claims to possess a divine right to rule and that Iran should be the “mother of all cities” of the Islamic World (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017, Okruhlik 2003). This aspect of their rivalry makes evident their competition to legitimize their regimes, while Tehran has repeatedly characterized the Saudi government as un-Islamic (Okruhlik 2003). Regarding the economic factors, the main reason of tension is oil prices, which are essential to the Iranian economy (Parry 2022). In the third case, the struggle for power and dominance is evident even by the naming dispute of the Gulf (Mabon 2017), with Iran considering itself the “*natural hegemon*” of the Gulf, while Riyadh is positioning itself as the leader of the Arab states (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017, Parry 2022).

Their competition and difference in their view of the region is also evident through their supporting sides in conflicts (Parry 2022). Riyadh and Tehran have supported opposite sides in various conflicts, such as in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen. In many cases, the side each state would choose was dictated by sectarianism, with Riyadh appealing to Sunni groups and Tehran to Shi'a groups (Crepy 2019). And what has probably cost Saudi Arabia is the fact that in all these cases, it found itself either defeated or forced to opt out, as the Iranian-backed side came out

ahead (Sadjadpour 2024). The case of Yemen was probably the most painful for the Kingdom, considering the extensive Saudi involvement and the cost of this war, while seeing the Kingdom's defeat (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017).

In the latest developments, it is crucial to mention the 2023 agreement of restoring their ties after seven years of severed diplomatic ties, after the 2016 attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Tehran (Wintour 2023). This does not indicate that the hegemonic rivalry and competition between Riyadh and Tehran is a tension that is likely to just cease to exist overnight, but instead they depend on coexistence (Farouk 2023, Alotaibi 2023, A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). They both have interests at stake that they will not let go of easily, and even though both of them strive for regional dominance, Iran still relies on Saudi Arabia, while the latter still fears Iran's nuclear potential (Jahner 2012). The estimation, after the previous analysis, is that a way, and perhaps the only one, for the tensions to be reduced would be if the costs reach a point where they are higher than their benefits (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). In that scenario, both powers would have to realize how much of a threat would be to their regional or even their domestic status.

4.3. Qatar's relations with Iran

As mentioned previously, Qatar has been challenging Riyadh's hegemonic goals and its ties to Iran have had a significant role in that. Qatar and Iran have a long history of relations, which they have managed to maintain throughout the years and the challenges that arose in the Gulf region. It is undeniable that the two countries do not have many attributes in common, however both sides have realized the strategic and political value of each other. Their relations are mainly based on bilateral trade, diplomacy, and regional dynamics. The most quite fitting description of their ties would probably be the one given by Kamrava, who characterizes this relation as “*a broadly friendly no dispute approach*” (Kamrava 2017).

To be able to comprehend their bilateral relations, it is important to take a look into the past and their evolution. It is possible to say that their ties started forming in the 1970s when Iran was regarded as a rising military and economic power and Qatar was viewed as a small country that was struggling to establish its own ground and presence in the area, especially under the strong Saudi presence (Kamrava 2017). Both countries realized that they could utilize these circumstances to their advantage. Doha

was moving carefully enough to not agitate Saudi Arabia but also coordinated its policies with Iran to an extent. In contrast with the rest of the actors in the area, Qatar treated Iran and its leaders with respect, while viewing it as a factor of regional stability and development and a useful prospect ally. Even at this time, Doha saw Tehran as a counterweight asset against the most radical Arab States in the region and the hegemonic tendencies of Saudi Arabia over the Gulf. This is a view that Qatar has maintained and operates on even today. On the other hand, Iran did not regard Qatar in the same manner but still saw a potentially strong ally in the area. The 1979 Revolution in Iran had the Gulf countries, Qatar included, skeptical and worried. However, the Qatari government referred to Iran as a dear neighbor and highlighted their connection through Islam (Kamrava 2017). Following the Revolution events, the Iran-Iraq War brought up new tensions, where Doha remained neutral, to the extent this was allowed to the Emirate in the context of its Gulf Cooperation Council membership. Qatar's neutrality was appreciated by Iran, which was shown with Iran's support to Qatar over its dispute with Bahrain.

Even though their relations were already on good terms, a real mutually beneficial relationship was formed between the 1990s and 2000s. This period was characterized by various security and balance changes in the Gulf area. After 1995 Doha aimed to establish a more independent presence and agenda, and to get out of the 'Saudi shadow', all while Iran is trying to establish its ground in the area and ideally create good relations, or at least as good as possible. These factors were more than enough for both sides to realize each other's value as a counterweight asset against the Saudi ambitions and goals for the power play in the Gulf. Qatar was the only country to vote against the UN Resolution 1696, for sanctions on Iran, a policy that changed after that in Resolutions 1737 & 1747. Despite the tensions that arose due to that, Iran and Qatar maintained their good relations. After 2010 they signed several agreements and participated in joint military exercises, with Qatar also attempting to start a region-wide dialogue.

Iran, in the 1990s and 2000s, used the notion of "brotherly ties" between itself and Qatar (Kamrava, Iran-Qatar Relations 2017), a notion that Qatar utilized a lot during the recent Gulf Crisis in 2017-2021. Doha has made quite clear over the years that is not willing to let anyone interfere with its relations with Iran, nor will allow

anyone to use Qatari soil to attack Iran. Some examples of the aforementioned positions of Qatar are:

“...the endeavors of brotherly and friendly countries...” (T. Al Thani, HH the Amir’s Speech at the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly 2020)

“...directly between us and the Iranians, without outside interference.” (His Highness the Amir’s Interview with the French Magazine “Le Point” 2022).

“...our internal and external policies are disrupted.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session 2017)

“...controlling our external relations...” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

“...attack a neighboring country to dictate its foreign and media policy...” (T. Al Thani, United Nations General Assembly General Debate 2017)

The extent and strength of their ties was strongly shown during the 2017 Blockade Crisis. Iran had a key-role in the events taking place and supported Qatar immensely, even though their bilateral relations were slightly strained (Zaccara and Mohiddin 2021). The blockade imposed aimed to make Qatar cut its ties to Iran, but in reality, had the opposite result. The Qatari-Iranian relations were mutually expanded, as Tehran was swift to fill in the gaps created by the embargo. Tehran opened the country’s airspace for Qatar Airways to operate, carried tons of food to Qatar’s market, and Iranian businesses tried to establish trade links with Doha. At the same time the Emir highlighted the importance of Iran to Qatar, mentioned several times that they should have relations since they are neighbors, and called all GCC members to talk with Iran.

“Iran is very important to us...” (His Highness the Amir’s Interview with the French Magazine “Le Point” 2022)

“The only way for us to provide food and medicine for our people was through Iran.” (HH the Amir’s interview with Charlie Rose on CBS’ 60 Minutes 2017)

“Iran is our neighbour” (His Highness the Amir’s Interview with the French Magazine “Le Point” 2022)

“...extend thanks to all the countries who supported us in our stance during this crisis.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session 2017)

“...all those who opened their airspace and territorial waters when our brothers closed theirs.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

“We encourage all GCC member states and Iran to talk to each other.” (His Highness the Amir’s Interview with the French Magazine “Le Point” 2022)

All the aforementioned events and statements resulted to a significant improvement of how Iran is perceived by the Qatari society, as per Qatar University’s Survey (Zaccara and Mohiddin 2021). Another advantage for Qatar was that with Iran’s support, Qatar became less reliant on Saudi Arabia while also making clear that the Qatari foreign policy will not be constrained to sectarian narratives, which allows Doha to escape the Saudi hegemonic shadow in the Gulf and be an active actor in the power play and balances in the area. Moreover, this crisis gave Tehran the opportunity to showcase that the actual threat to the Gulf could be Saudi Arabia and its hegemonic aspirations, and not Iran.

Over the years the meaning of Qatar and Iran to each other has remained more or less the same. For Qatar, Iran acts as a counterweight to Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy agenda, but Qatar also acknowledges its military vulnerability against Iran if a conflict was to occur. As per Kamrava, “*the benefits of accommodation and cooperation have outweighed the potential costs of competition and conflict*” (Kamrava 2017). While most of the countries in the Gulf, tend to shape their foreign policy on regional or global trends and furor, Qatar has decided to follow a more hedging, balancing strategy. Doha’s agenda includes maintaining lines of communication, serving as a mediator, heightening its regional role, security alliances and partnerships, and striving to use all that to influence and have a leverage in regional relations and hopefully beyond. Qatar's strategy is not new nor surprising, as many small countries adopt this type of agenda as a surviving strategy for themselves. Qatar has followed a hedging strategy since the mid-1990s, when even though Doha placed its security in the hands of the US she also managed to maintain good relations with US-opposing actors. As Kamrava wrote, “*For Qatar, Iran is one of the elements within which*

balances its relations with the US, [...] and places itself in a strategically pivotal position whereby neither the US nor Iran, nor even the other regional actors such as SA, can take it for granted or treat it as a small state with minimal or even secondary significance.” (Kamrava 2017)

Iran has, for years, competed for power and influence in the Near East, especially after the revolution, but conflicts and cultural divides have characterized its goals. For Iran, Qatar is its only Arab neighbor with whom Tehran has not been involved in territorial or strategic disputes. However, Tehran is also aware of how much of an asset Doha can be in regional and international issues that arise. For Iran, the Gulf is a region of potential but also real threats, ever since it was founded as a state. Iran has benefited over the years from Qatar’s hedging strategy, which is one of the reasons why Tehran has kept it as its goal to strengthen their relations but remains cautious enough to follow a carefully calculated policy, so as to not destabilize the existing common strategic ground with Doha. Iran appreciates and benefits from Qatar’s more neutral position within the GCC, compared to the rest of its members.

Looking into the future, the prospect of even closer relations between Tehran and Doha lies in Iran’s ability and willingness to establish better relations with the rest of the Gulf states. However, this is also something that should concern the said states, because, as it became clear in 2017-2021, Iran is swift and willing to fill in any gaps created by them.

Chapter 5: Qatar's attempt to escape the Saudi hegemony.

Chapter 5 attempts to explore Qatar's overall efforts to escape the Saudi hegemony in the Gulf region. Qatar's attempts were really visible during the Gulf crisis, which will be used as the leading example, and what came with that. To understand better what happened during these times, Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA) is being employed. Based on the Discourse Analysis utilized in this chapter this chapter delves into how Qatar viewed itself amid all that and how it managed to maintain power and resist the Saudi hegemonic shadow.

5.1. Qatar's attempts and goals

As mentioned above, Riyadh regards Qatar as a minute state and claims that it should comply with and follow the Saudi policies and there is mutual distrust between the two countries (Bilgin 2018). As the largest country and the leader of the GCC, Saudi Arabia has dictated its policies on the smaller states, Qatar included (Bilgin 2018). This attitude from the Saudi Kingdom and the existing mistrust propelled Doha to pursue and prioritize an independent policy, with its ultimate goal of escaping the shadow of the Saudi hegemony.

Doha's most significant achievement against Riyadh's wishes can be considered the almost continuous relations Doha has maintained with Tehran. As established earlier, Qatar has kept relations with Iran through a mutually beneficial tie to each other. For Qatar, this strategy means that it does not need to follow the Saudi trends and wishes in the Gulf in order to survive and can actually be an active actor in the area. As for Saudi Arabia, the relations between Doha and Tehran are more of a 'headache' issue, as it prevents Riyadh from keeping its hegemony over the region uninterrupted. And while this precisely is what Saudi Arabia considers a threat; it is important to note that Saudi Arabia is considered in many cases the biggest threat to the Qatari independence and sovereignty (Bilgin 2018).

Qatar's attempts to escape the Saudi hegemonic shadow in the Gulf have been quite evident over the years, something that has Saudi Arabia troubled and, in many cases, to view Qatar as a risk factor to the GCC. Doha's different path of foreign policy,

by maintaining good relations with countries Riyadh does not, combined with the refusal to be closely identified with the Saudi policies and the Kingdom in general made Qatar's intentions very clear from the start. However, the Emirate's efforts to slip from the Saudi hegemony in the area were reflected the best in the 2017 Crisis, how it responded to it and how it positioned itself.

5.2. The example of the Qatar Crisis

On June 5th, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain imposed a blockade on Qatar and cut their diplomatic ties with the Emirate (A. Fathollah-Nejad 2017). Qatar was caught by surprise by its neighboring countries' actions. The blockade-imposing countries, or what was called the "Arab-Quartet", based their actions on claims that Qatar was supporting and funding terrorism and was linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and thus constituted a destabilizing factor in the region. The four countries also recalled, forcibly, their citizens from Qatar, with a two-week's notice. Qatari citizens of these four countries were, also, forced to leave family, friends, and jobs behind and move back to Qatar. The blockade-imposing countries were rather quickly named a "Saudi-led coalition", by many media outlets all over the world. Kuwait played a key role in the dispute as the mediator, whose efforts were joined by the United States of America. Not even a month later, the blockading countries presented a list with thirteen demands, which Qatar characterized as excessive and unjustified, and they did not aim to fight terrorism but to reduce Qatar's sovereignty. Saudi Arabia went as far as planning to turn Qatar into an island, by building a long canal along the Saudi-Qatar border (Dudley 2018). However, the crisis came to an end in January 2021, with the signing of an agreement between Doha and Riyadh, which came after the Saudi decision to terminate the blockade and lift the sanctions on Qatar (Government Communications Office 2024). With the ending of this crisis it was clear that even though the blockading countries aimed to threaten Qatar's position and influence, this was not the case in the end (Alqashouti 2021). It is important to mention that it should be taken into consideration that this conflict is connected to past rifts (Mirouh 2014).

By employing Discourse Analysis, to approach this event, made possible to find answers to the key questions of "How did Qatar see itself?", "How did Qatar see other states?", and "How did Qatar see the conflict?", and the more complex question "How

did Qatar use discursive mechanisms to maintain power and resist the Saudi hegemony throughout the Gulf Crisis?”. It also highlighted the importance of language and discourse in politics and international relations Qatar saw itself as a victim of injustice and a victim of an organized campaign against it, which also shows how Qatar viewed the whole conflict. As for the other states, Qatar made sure to make a clear distinction between the countries that imposed the blockade, which are portrayed as liars and criminals, and the rest of the world, which are then divided into friendly countries and the international community. This last distinction is made mainly to highlight that there were countries who stood by Qatar from the beginning and states that did the same later on, as they were at first ‘blinded’ by the fabrications spread and victims of the blockade-imposing countries.

5.2.1. Discourse Analysis

The language used in the corpus was pretty clear and indicative, making the process of coding and analysis a bit easier. For this part of the paper to be as conclusive and easy to read as possible, the codes for the two subjects will be analyzed in parallel, while the rest of the codes will be analyzed individually. This will facilitate understanding the subject positioning and the juxtapositions taking place.

The subjects

“Qatar” & “Blockade-imposing countries”

The process of Othering started becoming visible quite early in this stage of the research. Something fundamental is the fact that even though throughout the corpus the Qatari authorities refer to both subjects, “Qatar” and the “blockade-imposing countries”, the difference between the number of appearances of these codes is astonishing. The code for Qatar appeared 832 times in the documents, while the code for the blockading countries appeared almost half the times, with 491 groundings. This is important for the analysis since it showcases that Qatar focused mainly on itself, rather than verbally attacking its ‘enemies.’ In the following part of the analysis, binaries hold a crucial role in shaping predicates (*Figure 6*).

From the first document, it was evident that Qatar was positioning itself as a victim in this whole dispute. Qatar is a victim of injustice, false accusations, and unlawful actions, but it is also a victim of crime. Finally, Qatar views itself as a victim of terrorism, which is a powerful statement, especially when referring to other Gulf

states. The mention of the ‘blockading countries’ as terrorists occurred only once, but the meaning carried is much heavier.

“...an attempt to undermine its security and stability” based on “false stories and fabrications.” (M. Al-Thani, Foreign Minister: Dialogue Is Qatar's Strategic Choice for Settling Disputes 2017)

“...part of an unlawful imposition of land, sea and air restrictions against Qatar...” (Government Communications Office, State of Qatar 2019)

“The countries who imposed the unjust blockade on Qatar have intervened in the internal affairs of the State by putting pressure on its citizens [...] Isn't this one of the definitions of terrorism?” (T. Al Thani, United Nations General Assembly General Debate 2017)

Since Qatar is the victim, someone has to be responsible for that. Thus, the blockade-imposing countries are portrayed as unjust, criminals, and unlawful actors who violate international law. The blockading countries are also viewed as terrorists, something that, of course, contradicts strongly with their justifications for the blockade.

“There has never been a legitimate reason for the illegal blockade of Qatar ...” (Government Communications Office, The GCO statement in response to UAE demand that Qatar give up the 2022 World Cup 2017)

“...the Blockading States have acted illegally and in violation of international law.” (Government Communications Office, International Court of Justice rules that Qatar can challenge airspace restrictions at the International Civil Aviation Organization 2020)

“The countries who imposed the unjust blockade on Qatar have intervened in the internal affairs of the State by putting pressure on its citizens [...] Isn't this one of the definitions of terrorism?” (T. Al Thani, United Nations General Assembly General Debate 2017)

However, Qatar did not see itself solely as a victim; it also portrays itself as a successful and independent entity. Qatar values and prioritizes its sovereignty and will not accept a solution that does not respect that, nor will it tolerate the undermining of its sovereignty by other states.

“Our sovereignty is a red line.” (HH the Amir’s interview with Charlie Rose on CBS’ 60 Minutes 2017)

“...Qatar’s national, political, economic and independent identity...” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

Moreover, every statement released by the authorities of Qatar highlights and focuses on the fact that Qatar is an advocate for cooperation, unity, stability, independence, security, and respect. Not only that, but the Emirate of Qatar is a peaceful country, that values and promotes peace.

“...building on the close cooperation and partnership...” (Government Communications Office, Statement by GCO Director in response to the new terrorist list 2017)

“...the “progressive and modern” country believes in diplomacy and promoting peace in the Middle East.” (M. Al-Thani, Foreign Minister: Qatar 'Willing to Talk' to Resolve Diplomatic Crisis 2017)

This exact subject positioning of Qatar means that the Other is acting against unity, cooperation, and security in the region, and it does not respect other subjects. It also means that the blockading countries are not peaceful and are destabilizing actors.

“This type of media campaigns could threaten the safety and security of the pilgrims.” (Government Communications Office, Statement from Qatar’s Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs on urging Saudi authorities to lift all obstacles imposed on Qatari citizens and residents wishing to perform their religious rituals 2019)

Furthermore, Qatar clearly states its willingness to participate in negotiations and resolve this dispute through dialogue.

“...we express our readiness for settlements within the framework of dialogue based on mutual respect for sovereignty and joint commitments.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session 2017)

“...lifting the blockade and settling differences through dialogue based on mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.”

(T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Doha Forum 2018 2018)

In this case, the unwillingness of the blockading countries to resolve this dispute is not only shown through the binaries but is also mentioned in various texts.

“...the siege countries are unwilling to reach a solution.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session 2017)

The Qatari authorities tend to highlight the country's success in continuous growth despite the blockade imposed against it. Of course, in this process of growth for the country in such hard times, the role of its own citizens is of high importance, and Qatari officials made sure to mention that.

“Despite the obstacles imposed upon us, including a full land, air and sea blockade beginning 5th of June of last year, Qatar secured new trade routes, accelerated economic diversity, and bonded together in unity.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Munich Security Conference 2018)

The blockade-imposing countries are unsuccessful in their efforts to harm and undermine Qatar. The blockade did not stop the Emirate from growing, and most importantly, it did not affect the citizens.

“Qatar’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at current prices grew in 2018 by about 15% and non-hydrocarbon GDP by about 9%.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the 48th Advisory Council Session 2019)

Qatar views itself as a country with morals, values, and principles that it maintains even through difficult times. The Emirate and its people have prioritized their dignity and morals, not letting the ‘fabrications’ of other countries affect them and take away those values.

“...prosperous society that reflects our lifestyle and behavior guided by the values of humanity and decency.” (S. Al Thani 2019)

“...we will continue to provide them [Bahraini citizens] with hospitality and care.” (Government Communications Office, Government Communications Office statement on Bahraini citizens transiting home 2020)

The aforementioned means that the countries partaking in the blockade have no moral values or dignity. The blockading countries tend to prioritize their interests over the principles that they have.

“The actions of the blockading nations also violate the principles of the sovereign equality of states...” (Government Communications Office, Qatar condemns the leaking of the Riyadh Agreement 2017)

“...favor immediate interests over principles...” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

“...the Kingdom of Bahrain has launched allegations, false accusations and politicized the humanitarian situation of its citizens attempting to transit home.” (Government Communications Office, The State of Qatar Welcomes News That Bahraini Citizens Can Transit Home 2020)

Qatar values family ties, both internal and external. This is shown in the parts where the Amir refers multiple times to Qatari citizens as ‘brothers and sisters’ and as a united family, but he makes sure to equally highlight these family bonds with the Arab states and people.

“Brothers and sisters, in these circumstances that our country is passing...” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

“[...] humanitarian difficulties facing our brothers in Palestine [...]” (T. Al Thani, HH the Amir’s Speech at the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly 2020)

The blockading countries, on the other hand, are countries that have turned against their ‘brothers’, and have severed family ties.

“...our brothers blocked everything...” (HH the Amir’s interview with Charlie Rose on CBS’ 60 Minutes 2017)

“...intervention by these countries to sever family ties.” (T. Al Thani, United Nations General Assembly General Debate 2017)

At the same time, Qatar is a civilized country that behaves accordingly. This positioning of Qatar automatically implies that the blockade-imposing countries are behaving uncivilized.

“...our Qatari Arab and Islamic identity and culture on sound moral and civilized grounds.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the 47th Advisory Council Session 2018)

The Amir of Qatar also mentions that he is proud of its people and the unity and solidarity they have shown. Thus, Qatar is portrayed as a proud country, proud of its people and its history.

“I'm so proud of the people [...] We're proud of what we are. We are proud of our history” (HH the Amir's interview with Charlie Rose on CBS' 60 Minutes 2017)

Qatar repeatedly reaffirms its commitment and dedication to its goals and responsibilities towards its nation, the world, and the obligations that come with its participation in organizations and agreements.

“Qatar's determined efforts to defeat terrorism...” (Government Communications Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017)

This implies that the blockading countries are not acting according to their responsibilities. Alongside that, there are also mentions that these countries are imposing a threat to the “war on terror” efforts.

“...the blockading countries are not committed to the fight against terrorism.” (Government Communications Office, Statement by GCO Director in response to the new terrorist list 2017)

“...a desperate attempt by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to deflect attention from their own failings to counter terrorism and extremism at home.” (Government Communications Office, Statement by GCO Director in response to The Washington Post 2017)

“...they are inflicting damage on the war on terror...” (T. Al Thani, United Nations General Assembly General Debate 2017)

Lastly, Qatar views itself as a country operating, at the time, under siege. This element is not only directly referred to but also enhanced by the code “people under occupation.” This also makes the blockade participating countries the oppressors.

“Stirring up tension and dictating the will by using siege and sanctions...” (His Highness Speech at the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly 2019)

The blockading countries are interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and as a result of that they are targeting civilians and impacting their everyday lives.

“...interfering in our internal affairs and addressing the people is unacceptable.” (M. Al-Thani, Foreign Minister: Dialogue Is Qatar's Strategic Choice for Settling Disputes 2017)

“These measures impacted all goods passing across...” (Government Communications Office 2018)

The countries participating in the blockade against Qatar are liars and are fabricating and spreading false information.

“...the nations blockading Qatar by publishing propaganda and lies.” (Government Communications Office, Statement by GCO Director in response to Le Point Magazine accusations 2017)

“We encourage the blockading countries to spend less time on drafting these fabricated lists...” (Government Communications Office, Statement by GCO Director in response to the new terrorist list 2017)

“...the blockading states have been aggressive to Qatar and insincere to the public.” (H. Al-Thani 2018)

The blockade-imposing countries have organized a premeditated attack against Qatar, aiming to harm and undermine it. Part of this effort is also the fact that they want to establish their guardianship.

“...the illegal blockade has nothing to do with combatting terrorism, it is about limiting Qatar’s sovereignty, and outsourcing our foreign policy.” (Government Communications Office, The list of demands is about limiting Qatar’s sovereignty 2017)

“...the purpose is clear: the imposition of guardianship over the State...” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017)

“...using the council [GCC] as a tool to impose a guardianship on a member state or thinking about imposing a guardianship on the State of Qatar...” (M. Al-Thani, Foreign Minister: Dialogue Is Qatar's Strategic Choice for Settling Disputes 2017)

“...a number of actions designed to damage Qatar, its economy, and its residents.” (Government Communications Office, The State of Qatar Files Lawsuit Against Currency Manipulators in New York and London 2019)

After the analysis of the two subjects, the processes of linking and differentiation are quite visible, even before they are translated into Hansen's figure (*Figure 4*) (Hansen 2006). Qatar is a very positively portrayed entity, that has morals, is peaceful and civilized, but is also a victim. Every positive characteristic that is attributed to this subject enhances the rest of them. But simultaneously, every single one of these positive predicates for Qatar creates a negative one for the other subject, the blockading countries. In this way, the blockading countries are, among others, not peaceful, uncivilized, have no morals, and are criminals. The figure of linking and differentiation process is provided in the appendices (*Figure 5*).

“People under occupation”

This is a code with only 21 groundings, but it proceeds the remaining two in the analysis, as it is a code with double meaning and a strong connotation, that actually connects to the “Qatar” code. In several documents, the Qatari authorities refer directly to “people under occupation/siege”, which in most cases reflects its literal meaning referring to the Palestinian conflict. However, this code has several metaphorical uses, as mentioned above. Qatar is drawing a parallel between itself and the people under occupation. This is something that adds strength and salience to the “victim” predicate for Qatar, as it enhances the binary of a ‘victim’ and a ‘criminal’ and reflects how Qatar considers its own status to be during the blockade. At the same time, this also means that the “criminals” predicate attributed to the blockading countries becomes even stronger and more salient and makes even more transparent the way the Qatari discourse views and classifies these countries.

“...those who are subjected to crimes against humanity and those who are under siege.” (T. Al Thani, United Nations General Assembly General Debate 2017)

“Friendly countries”

This code has 94 groundings and refers to friendly and supportive countries in general, but there are mentions of specific countries as well. Starting from the general perspective, these countries are referred to as “friendly”, “brotherly/sisterly” or “fraternal” countries and are countries that show solidarity.

“...brotherly and friendly countries...” (T. Al Thani, HH the Amir’s Speech at the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly 2020)

“...the foreign ministers of fraternal and friendly countries...” (M. Al-Thani, Foreign Minister: Dialogue Is Qatar's Strategic Choice for Settling Disputes 2017)

Additionally, these countries are viewed as advocates of human rights, cooperation, peace, security, and commitment.

“...constructive and positive contributions and defended human rights...” (M. Al-Thani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs: HH the Amir of Kuwait Has Great Stature at the Heart of Every Qatari Citizen 2020)

“...to ensure cooperation in key areas such as security, intelligence, and finance” (Government Communications Office, US and Qatar sign MoU on combating terrorism 2017)

Also, they are countries that have helped Qatar and opened their airspace and territorial waters. This is closely connected to the fact that Qatar is respected and valued by these countries and that they have realized Qatar’s rightness in this dispute.

“Qatar's determined efforts to defeat terrorism have been acknowledged and appreciated by the security and intelligence services of the United States and its allies, who value Qatar's substantial contributions to the battle against violent extremism.” (Government Communications Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017)

“...all those who opened their airspace and territorial waters when our brothers closed theirs.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

To be more specific, the Qatari discourse focuses on three countries that have an important role. These countries are Kuwait, the United States of America, and Iran. Kuwait and the US have been leading the mediations and negotiations, and thus are very often mentioned. On the other hand, Iran did not have many mentions, but it is viewed as an important country and neighbor. However, there are mentions of other countries as well, but they do not seem to have such an important impact.

“I extend my sincere thanks to my brother His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the brotherly State of Kuwait, for all his commended efforts in mediating...” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session 2017)

“Iran is very important to us...” (His Highness the Amir’s Interview with the French Magazine “Le Point” 2022)

“International community”

The code for the international community appeared in 45 groundings and refers to the entirety of the world. The international community is viewed as an advocate of human rights, stability, peace, security, and international law. It is also a community with many responsibilities towards people and one that should not accept injustice and illegal actions. Moreover, it is regarded as a civilized community with principles that values dialogue.

“...mechanisms adopted by the international community in the field of collective security, deterring international law violators, ensuring the respect for the sovereignty and security of states...” (His Highness Speech at the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly 2019)

“...the people of the world do not accept injustice...” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech to the Citizens and Residents of Qatar 2017)

In complete contrast to the previous, the international community is also regarded as a hypocrite, unjust, a community that has given up and hesitates to act, and that ultimately has lost people’s faith in it. It is also considered a community, whose improvements do not include all the countries.

“...the world is defined by hypocrisy and injustice.” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Munich Security Conference 2018)

The international community is also threatened by terrorism, and thus it should take all the necessary steps to fight it, and to stop its funding.

“...terrorism that is a threat for the rest of the world.” (HH the Amir’s interview with Charlie Rose on CBS’ 60 Minutes 2017)

In this crisis, the international community stands by Qatar’s side and helps it. Qatar is widely respected by this community and has managed to further develop their relations. At the same time, the international community is a victim of the lies of the blockading countries, but it is not convinced by them, it questions them and asks for evidence.

“The fabrications [...] against the State of Qatar have failed to convince the international community” (T. Al Thani, His Highness Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Council 46th Session 2017)

Chapter 6: Qatar: an upcoming power in the region

This chapter focuses on exploring how Qatar can be viewed as an upcoming power in the region and what mechanisms and strategies it has employed to get from a “micro-state” to an upcoming power. It also delves into how the aforementioned mechanisms have granted Qatar the ability to be independent and resist the hegemonic tendencies in the Arab–Persian Gulf.

Qatar’s first steps towards becoming a more influential actor in the area can be traced back to 1995, when Sheikhs Hamad bin Khalifa and Hamad bin Jassim started the internationalization of the Qatari foreign policy, with a “*hands-on style of policy making*” (Ulrichsen 2021). During Emir Tamim’s rule, policymaking entered a less personalized era, becoming more institutionalized, which earned Qatar broad international support during the 2017 crisis (Ulrichsen 2021).

Qatar’s attempts of differentiation can also be shown since the 2011 Uprisings, but also through the foundation of the Al-Jazeera Media Network. The foreign policies of Riyadh and Doha have been clearly not aligned over the years, with the latter aiming to become a regional power (Bilgin 2018). A strategy that Qatar has followed, especially in the post-2011 period, that pointed out its power is the active involvement in various developments in the area, in some cases more than just a mediator (Islam 2023). Significant examples of Qatar’s multifaceted mediation are the cases of Yemen, Djibouti/Eritrea, Sudan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Palestine (Alqashouti 2021). With Doha gaining central role in major events in the region it came the realization that under the right circumstances and the right decisions taken, a what is called “minute” state can in fact turn into an active and impactful actor. It is important to highlight that the will to upgrade its role as a regional force was not the only motive for Doha to become an active mediator, but it was accompanied by the need to avoid the consequences of refusing to take any action, be decreasing the chances of a spillover (Kamrava 2015). The Emirate’s continuous, and in many cases very successful (Ulrichsen 2021), mediation works has granted it more power, influence, and credibility, turning it into a reliable actor in the Arab-Persian Gulf and beyond (Islam 2023).

Qatar’s mediation role has been constantly bettered, after realizing that many of its successful mediation turned out to be semi-successful as they provided only short-term solutions, like the cases of Libya and Syria (Ulrichsen 2021). This mediation

policy has been by many characterized as a “state branding” path, however the roots of this policy should not be dismissed so simply. As it is clear, Qatar lacks the strategic depth and influence, especially next to the more prominent actors in the Arab-Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabi and Iran, which thus require from Doha a unique foreign policy, using mediation as a protective and conflict prevention measure (Alqashouti 2021).

However, it is imperative to remember that Qatar did not gain the ground it has only through its foreign policy, but rather it has utilized its soft power. Key role in that had the Al Jazeera Media Network, founded in 1996. Al Jazeera and its controversial and norm breaking publications and positions have often been the center of attention and the cause of some turbulence in the Gulf. It was no coincidence nor a senseless demand from Saudi Arabia to Qatar to “*shut down Al Jazeera and its affiliate stations*”³ (Jabbar 2017). It also of high importance that Al Jazeera is not only a “controversial” media outlet, but most importantly is the first and only pan-Arab media platform to broadcast worldwide, being able to compete with media outlets like the BBC, Sky or CNN (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018, Naier 2021). Qatar’s exercise of soft power through the media network has heightened its overall power and influence rise, challenging the Saudi hegemony and in many cases its credibility as well, turning Al Jazeera into an effective tool (Naier 2021). Another aspect of Doha’s utilization of soft power is its investment in sports diplomacy, with the most recent example being the 2022 FIFA World Cup. With this, Qatar strengthens its attempts to present itself as a modern Arab state, which increases the tension between Doha and Riyadh, as the latter perceives this as an attempt for Doha to gain its independence from the Saudi hegemony (Islam 2023; Khodr 2014).

Qatar has expanded its soft power in its international relations too. Qatar is indeed a small state, which means that what is traditionally considered hard power is limited. However, Doha’s strategy of enhancing and balancing its ties to all parties, regardless of the enmity between them. Doha’s diverse partnerships policy first was established by Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, whose belief was that strong networking and diverse partnerships are the answers to a long-lasting security strategy (Krieg 2021). Qatar is hosting the biggest air base of the US, the Al Udeid base and has several American university branch campuses, all while is also having ties with parties like the

³ It was the third demand on the 13 demands list that Saudi Arabia gave to Qatar to comply with during the 2017 blockade (Jabbar 2017).

Taliban or Hamas (Fraihat 2020). The country's consistent neutrality and independence ability, in such a hyper-politicized area, has allowed Doha to elevate its role and influence as a trustworthy and in demand mediator (Alqashouti 2021). Another factor that heightens Doha's mediation role and credibility is the outcomes of the 2017 crisis and its involvement in various events after it (Alqashouti 2021). The utilization of mediation as soft diplomacy serves Qatar's goal to build a higher profile in the Gulf.

Qatar's power is also rooted in its internal affairs and situation. Qatari citizens enjoy a very lavish welfare system, which contributes to the high satisfactory rate towards the state (Khodr 2014). The often reforms in many state sectors are there to cover any existing gaps and insufficiencies. General public satisfaction leads to a general common prideful national feeling, which gives the Emirate enough internal stability to be able to project some sense of leadership to the rest of the states (Khodr 2014).

There is another asset for Qatar to utilize in order to possibly create another level of soft power. Qatar's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) infrastructure has had a key-role to the country's transformation. This asset has given Doha the ability to get over the insecurity dilemma most small states face⁴ (Krieg 2021). Doha has indeed used its LNG revenues as a tool in its soft power strategy, mainly by employing it in financial diplomacy (Miller 2020, Kozhanov 2021). In Miller's words, by deploying the energy sector in its soft power strategy, Qatar has showed "*its commitment to high-risk, high-cost strategies with only medium-to-long term benefits; its willingness to enter into innovative and long-term partnerships with external actors; its understanding of the value of investing in cooperation that fosters interdependence in the international system and; its commitment to pragmatism at the policymaking level*" (Miller 2020).

The Gulf crisis of 2017 managed to showcase that Qatar is able to maintain its power and footing, even in the middle of a crisis. The Qatari government seems to be aware of how language and discourse can impact international relations and events, and it used this to its advantage. The way Qatar maneuvered the whole rift, without its economy, society, or function getting really affected by it, and managed to gain the sympathy of several countries, including the USA, who stood by the Saudi side at first, resulted in the Saudi-led coalition losing its credibility. The aforementioned also had as

⁴ Qatar holds a little over 12% of the world's total natural gas reserves. (Worldometer 2024)

a result for the Qatari foreign and institutional policy to be strengthened, making Doha able to reach out to worldwide partners employing public diplomacy (Ulrichsen 2021). This shows that even though Qatar is a small country, it can actually stand its ground and resist the hegemonic shadow that Saudi Arabia is trying to establish.

It is quite evident that the power distribution and balance has been shifting in the Arab-Persian Gulf, and while the Saudi power is still able of having the smaller states cooperate with its policies, Qatar is not one of them (Islam 2023). In fact, Doha is not only able to resist or balance out the influence of the Saudi shadow, but it is also in the position to challenge and compete with Saudi Arabia's state as the regional hegemonic power (Islam 2023). Qatar's rising power is perceived as a potential threat to the Gulf and the GCC, and thus it can also have been a reason behind the blockade crisis, in attempt for Saudi Arabia to keep the regional dynamics from changing further and keeping its position as the regional hegemon (Islam 2023).

Chapter 7: Conclusions

The research question(s) will be answered in the last chapter of this paper. This chapter will summarize the paper, highlighting the most important information extracted from the previous chapters. Moreover, there will be references to any possible recommendations for future research and gaps in existing research and literature.

While concluding this thesis is imperative to revisit the primary research questions that guided this research, and these were: “How is hegemony defined in the Gulf and what is the role of the Qatar Crisis (2017-2021)?”, “How is Qatar trying to escape the Saudi hegemony in the Gulf and how does that affect their relations?”, and “How did Qatar use discursive mechanisms to maintain power throughout the Gulf Crisis?” To be able to provide satisfactory answers to these questions, it was necessary to address smaller sub-topics, such as the intra-GCC relations, and the relations with Iran, Qatar's policies and strategy, the Qatari self-perception, its view of other states, and its positioning and handling of the blockade. The research conducted underscored the importance of soft power in Qatar's diplomatic strategy, using mediation, the media and its LNG infrastructure. The country leveraged its media outlets, particularly Al Jazeera, to disseminate its perspective and counter the narratives propagated by its adversaries. This strategic use of media allowed Qatar to shape public opinion and influence the discourse surrounding the crisis. Additionally, Qatar engaged in diplomatic efforts to build alliances with friendly nations and to create and maintain a diverse mediation portfolio, further reinforcing its position on the international stage. This approach not only mitigated the immediate impacts of the blockade but also positioned Qatar as a more influential and credible actor in regional and global affairs.

The Qatar Crisis represents a significant turning point in the geopolitical landscape of the Gulf region, highlighting the complexities and the interplay of power dynamics, identity construction, and the role of discourse in international relations. The 2017 blockade has underscored the significance of discourse in shaping state identities and power relations. This research demonstrates that the narratives constructed by states are not merely reflections of their realities but are instrumental in shaping those realities. This thesis has sought and achieved to explore how Qatar navigated the challenges posed during the blockade by the blockade imposing countries and how it utilized discursive mechanisms to maintain its power and assert its identity during this

turbulent period. and this is of high importance because as Qatar continues to navigate its position in a complex geopolitical landscape, understanding the narratives it constructs will be essential for comprehending the future trajectory of Gulf relations and the quest for regional stability. Through a detailed analysis grounded in Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis, the research has illuminated the broader dynamics of hegemony and resistance within the GCC and provided insights into how Qatar constructed its narrative, differentiated itself from its adversaries, engaged with the international community, and maintained power. The distinction between the blockading countries and the international community served to highlight Qatar's alliances with friendly nations and its appeal to the broader international community for support.

The discourse analysis on the 2017 crisis, revealed that Qatar positioned itself as a victim of an unjust campaign, framing the blockade as an infringement on its sovereignty and a violation of international norms. Qatar has effectively asserted its agency and influence in the region by framing itself as a victim and differentiating itself from its adversaries. This self-perception was also central to Qatar's narrative and served to garner sympathy and support from the international community. Doha's discourse emphasized the country's positive attributes—such as being a peaceful, civilized nation committed to human rights—while simultaneously portraying the blockading countries as aggressors lacking moral integrity. As theorized by Hansen, this linking and differentiation process was crucial in establishing the binaries of "Self" and "Other." By framing the blockading countries as liars and criminals, Qatar effectively highlighted its own resilience and moral high ground.

The findings of this thesis have broader implications for understanding the dynamics of power and hegemony in the Gulf region. The Qatar Crisis has highlighted the complexities of intra-GCC relations and the shifting alliances that characterize the region. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the crisis has drawn attention to the role of smaller states like Qatar in shaping regional dynamics. Qatar's attempts to assert its agency and escape the Saudi hegemonic shadow underscore the importance of considering the perspectives of all actors within the Gulf sub-system. Moreover, the crisis has revealed the limitations of traditional power structures in the region. The blockading countries, despite their larger size and resources, were unable to achieve their objectives of isolating Qatar and

undermining its influence. Instead, Qatar's resilience and strategic maneuvering allowed it to emerge from the crisis with a strengthened identity and a more prominent role in regional and international affairs. This outcome challenges conventional notions of power and dominance, suggesting that smaller states can effectively navigate crises and assert their interests in a complex geopolitical landscape.

This research contributes to the existing literature on Gulf hegemony, power balance and dynamics, and intra-GCC relations by addressing the often-overlooked dynamics of Qatar's position and influence within the region. Although, over the years, a significant part of research has focused on the rivalry and hegemonic struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, this study focuses on Qatar. This paper highlights the significance of Qatar's attempts to redefine its role and influence in the Gulf, as well as to establish its own agenda. This thesis showcases the role of discourse in international relations and the complexities of power dynamics in the Gulf, ultimately highlighting the importance of considering the perspectives of all actors within the regional system. The analysis of Qatar's discourse during the crisis provides valuable insights into the ways in which language and narrative shape state behavior and identity. This thesis also fills, to an extent, the existing gap on the intra-GCC relations by providing a nuanced analysis of Qatar's foreign policy strategies and the implications for regional power dynamics.

While this thesis grants valuable insights into the power dynamics in the Gulf, there is ample space for future research, on several avenues. Starting with the historical background of the intra-GCC relations, it is pretty evident that there is a wealth of information on the relationships between major powers in the region. However, there is comparatively less focus on the dynamics between smaller states and their neighbors. There is also a need for further exploration of the implications of the Qatar Crisis for other small states facing similar challenges in the international arena, as understanding how these states navigate crises and assert their agency in the face of more considerable powers can provide valuable insights into the broader discourse on power and identity in international relations. As the Gulf region continues to grapple with the implications of the crisis, the lessons learned from Qatar's experience will be crucial for understanding the evolving landscape of Gulf politics and the quest for stability in a rapidly changing world. Moreover, future research could examine the long-term effects of the Qatar Crisis on intra-GCC relations and regional dynamics. As the Gulf region

continues to evolve, it will be important to assess how the crisis has reshaped alliances, perceptions, and power balances among the member states of the GCC. Furthermore, there is room for research on the Qatar Crisis of 2017 from the rest of the involved states' perspectives. Finally, the role of media in shaping discourse and public perception during international crises warrants further investigation. The case of Qatar and Al Jazeera provides a compelling example of how media can be utilized as a soft power and influence tool.

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Appendices

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3A	Model 3B
Analytical focus	Official discourse: Heads of states Governments Senior civil servants High ranked military Heads of international institutions Official statements by international institutions	Wider foreign policy debate: Political opposition The media Corporate institutions	Cultural representations: Popular culture High culture	Marginal political discourses: Social movements Illegal associations Academics NGOs
Object of analysis	Official texts Direct and secondary intertextual links Supportive texts Critical texts	Political texts Parliamentary debates Speeches, statements Media texts Editorials Field reporting Opinion—debate Corporate institutions Public campaigns Recurring intertextual links	Film, fiction, television, computer games, photography, comics, music, poetry, painting, architecture, travel writing, autobiography	Marginal newspapers, websites, books, pamphlets Academic analysis
Goal of analysis	The stabilization of official discourse through intertextual links The response of official discourse to critical discourses	The hegemony of official discourse The likely transformation of official discourse The internal stability of media discourses	Sedimentation or reproduction of identities in cultural representations	Resistance in non-democratic regimes Dissent in cases of models 1 and 2 hegemony Academic debates

Figure 1: Hansen's Intertextual Research Models

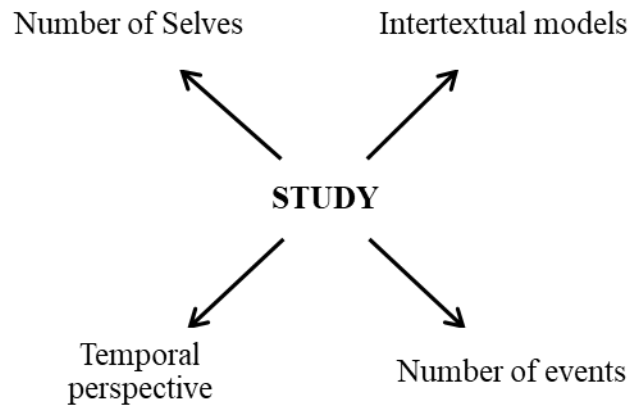


Figure 2: Hansen's Research Design

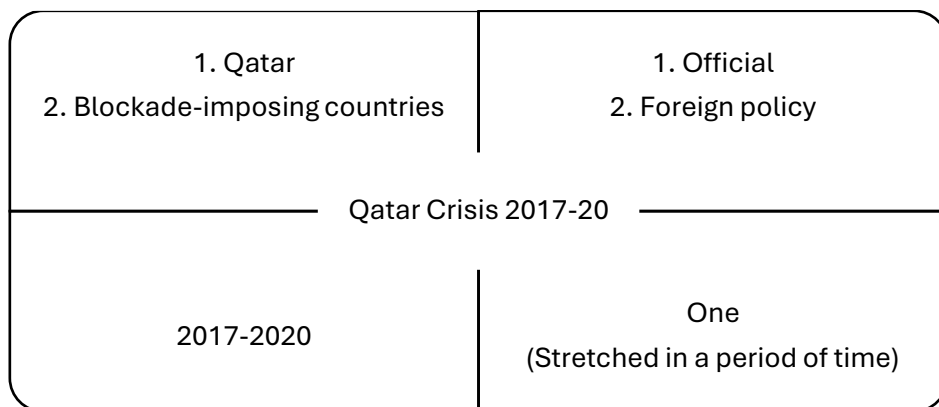


Figure 3: Thesis Research Design

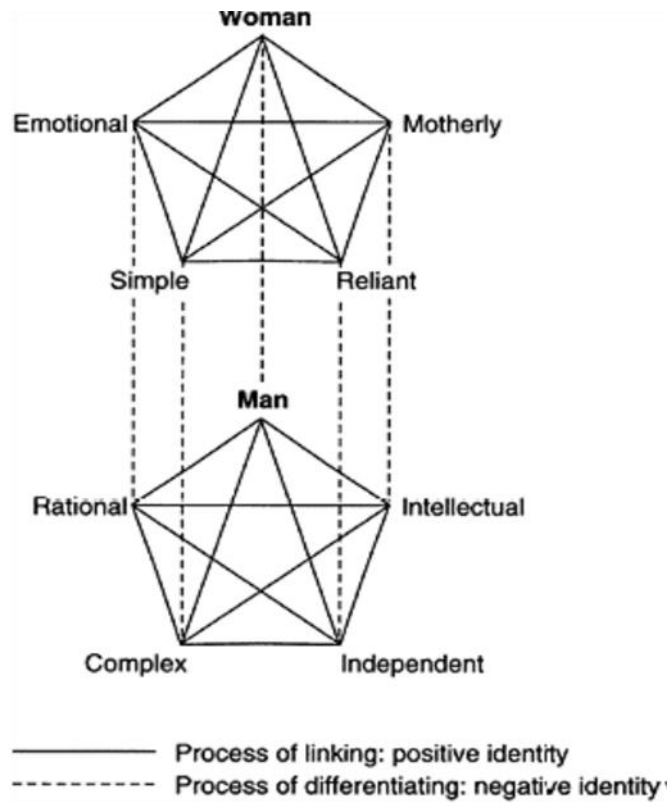


Figure 4: Hansen's figure of linking and differentiating processes.

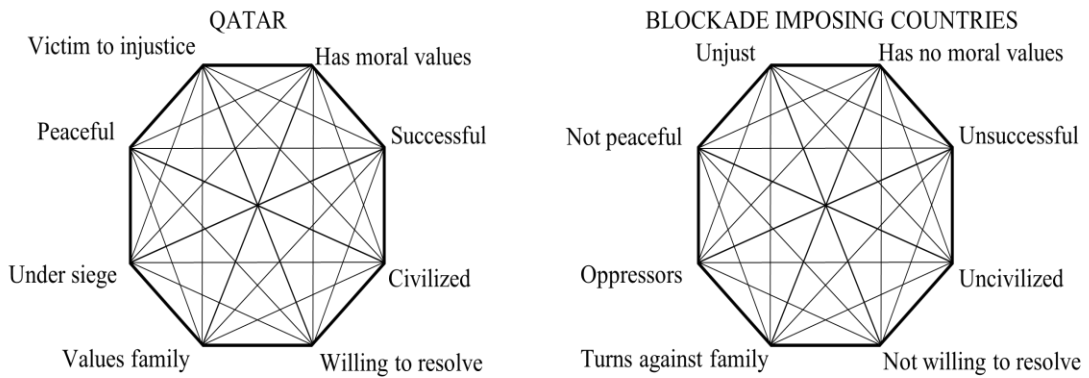


Figure 5: The processes of linking and differentiation between Qatar and the blockade imposing countries.

Qatar	Blockade-Imposing Countries	Friendly Countries	International community
<p>Is an advocate of cooperation, unity, stability, independence, security, and respect (121)</p> <p>Views Qataris as ‘Brothers and Sisters’ (60)</p> <p>Calls for dialogue and negotiations (45)</p> <p>Views other Arab states as ‘Brothers and Sisters’ (42)</p> <p>Is a victim to injustice and illegal actions (37)</p> <p>Is sovereign (34)</p> <p>Has values/morals/dignity (34)</p> <p>Is peaceful/Promotes peace (25)</p> <p>Is independent (16)</p> <p>Is determined/committed to its goals and responsibilities (15)</p> <p>Is under siege/occupation (12)</p> <p>Is prideful (7)</p> <p>Is successful (5)</p> <p>Is a subject to a crime (4)</p> <p>Has civilized behavior (3)</p> <p>Is a victim of terrorism (1)</p>	<p>Are lying/fabricating (59)</p> <p>Have premeditated intentions/organized a campaign to damage/harm/undermine Qatar (39)</p> <p>Are unjust and unlawful (35)</p> <p>Turned against their brothers/severing family ties (21)</p> <p>Are interfering in internal affairs (17)</p> <p>Are unsuccessful (10)</p> <p>Are undermining the stability, unity, and progress of the region (8)</p> <p>Are trying to establish guardianship (6)</p> <p>Are criminals (4)</p> <p>Have uncivilized behavior (3)</p> <p>Are unwilling to resolve the crisis (3)</p> <p>Are undermining the ‘war on terror’ efforts (2)</p> <p>Are targeting civilians (1)</p> <p>Are terrorists (1)</p>	<p>Show solidarity/are friends/brothers (23)</p> <p>Kuwait (20)</p> <p>Help/open their airspace and waters (14)</p> <p>Value and respect Qatar (13)</p> <p>US (13)</p> <p>Are advocates for HR, peace, security, and cooperation (10)</p> <p>Iran (3)</p> <p>UK (3)</p> <p>France (2)</p> <p>Turkey (1)</p> <p>Germany (1)</p> <p>Russia (1)</p> <p>Europe (1)</p>	<p>Advocates for stability, peace, cooperation, HR, international law/has responsibility/ does not accept injustice (17)</p> <p>Is not convinced, is a victim, and questions the blockading countries (8)</p> <p>Has principles/is civilized/values dialogue/committed (7)</p> <p>Is a hypocrite/hesitates/gave up (5)</p> <p>Is threatened by terrorism/needs to act on it (3)</p> <p>Respects Qatar/is alike/has good relations (3)</p> <p>Helps/stands with Qatar (3)</p> <p>Its improvements are not inclusive (1)</p>

Figure 6: Predicates and practices (Doty 1993)

