A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to analyze the Saudi-Iranian rivalry through both the social constructivist and rationalist approaches, and compare the approaches within the context of the rivalry. The history of the rivalry will be explored in the first two chapters. As one of the most vulnerable states in the region, Bahrain will be used as a case study to examine the intricacies of the situation. Bahrain’s complicated role in the overarching politics of the region provides ample room for theoretical analysis. The rivalry operates on levels addressed best by different theories: internal structure (manifested in religious and economic turmoil) and balance of power. This paper will discuss the role of perception in state behaviour and how it applies to the modern dynamic between the two states, as well as how perception fits into the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. In doing so, I aim to explain the rivalry dynamic and offer predictions on the best courses of action for the three states.

Key words: Saudi-Iran rivalry, Bahrain, social constructivism, neorealism, neoliberalism.
Introduction

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has long been a staple in the Middle East. The intensity has varied over the years, but it has consistently been one of the driving forces behind the politics of the region, specifically around the Persian Gulf. Along with Iraq up until 2003, the two states vied for supremacy within the Gulf region over several decades. It was the Iranian revolution in 1979 that spelled a radical change for interstate relations as the region plunged into uncertainty. There was serious concern that the Islamic revolution would cause a revolutionary wave in neighbouring states and, that concern, manifested in the perceived Iranian influence in various states, continues to this day. Of these states, Bahrain has faced heavy pressure from all sides. It began with the 1971 British withdrawal from the region, and has since become an ideological battleground in the greater Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Bahrain will be used as a case study to examine the rivalry and place it into perspective. The theory section will focus on the nature of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and how it fits into the greater theoretical framework, and Bahrain’s example will be examined to achieve this. Until 1979, the rivalry was unremarkable in scope. It lacked the distinct ideological component that looms over the relationship today. More specifically, Iran under the Pahlavi regime was a secular state that was not in ideological competition with Saudi ambitions of leadership in the Islamic world. Both countries were ruled by conservative monarchies; they were status quo powers whose rivalry extended primarily to power politics as opposed to a greater ideological struggle (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009).

This is a key point of the political situation prior to the Islamic revolution; religious ideology was not incredibly relevant to the overarching inter-state relations of the Gulf States. In Bahrain, the struggle for influence was rooted in power politics and political oppression with only a flavour of religious ideology introduced following the revolution. Indeed, because Iran was largely secular and religious competition was limited at the state level, Henner Fürtig (2002) argues that other, more traditional realist factors shaped relations. Aarts and Van Duijne (2009) argue that Fürtig’s characterisation of the modern Gulf political history is the most apt: it is best defined as a power struggle among states even after the revolution. This argument maintains that Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq all competed for dominance, and that events like the Iranian revolution or the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait pushed each state together or apart in terms of cooperation (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). One example is Saudi support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and its subsequent closer ties with Iran following the invasion of Kuwait. In this sense, a classic balance of power scenario is laid out. The authors
do not disregard the influence of domestic politics or ideology as factors affecting the modern political landscape, but they do hold that the balance of power explanation is the most pertinent when addressing contemporary Saudi-Iranian relations. The removal of Saddam Hussein from power was welcomed at first by Saudi Arabia, but the subsequent power vacuum and uncertainty regarding Iranian influence has complicated the political landscape significantly (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). The authors also note (in regards to the rivalry over post-Saddam Iraq) in citing a RAND study that they believe “sectarianism and ideology shape relations, but do not define them” (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009: 67). This is an interesting point but, as will be examined later, perhaps not a wholly satisfactory gauge of the rivalry. Many interconnected factors contribute to the competition; what “defines” it is moot. One must examine how the primary actors view the dynamic and how it influences their behaviour. Realist theory would imply that state behaviour is generally a given based on the most rational course of action, but perception has a major role to play in intentions and behaviour; it can be argued that perception is influenced by social constructs.

Structural realism (neorealism) makes a compelling argument to explain the rivalry’s context, but it does not fit perfectly and requires additional explanation. Neoliberal institutionalism interprets the great importance of international regimes like OPEC and the Gulf Cooperation Council. A social constructivist approach offers greater insight and flexibility in analyzing the rivalry, but it is not a perfect substitute for the aforementioned traditional rationalist analyses. As such, the rivalry will be examined with all approaches in mind.

To better understand how the Saudi-Iranian rivalry can be placed in a theoretical framework, we must first address the recent history and issues surrounding the relations. While the rivalry with its many components is not radically different from other inter-state rivalries, the intricacies of the two states as well as the surrounding region give credence to the notion that it is unique.

1. The Rivalry in Context

The Cold War was one of the driving forces that thrust Saudi Arabia and Iran into greater regional competition, giving their otherwise local security concerns global significance. Initially, Saudi Arabia was arguably the undisputed religious leader in the region as the Al Saud dynasty pushed Wahhabi Islam, a major component of the Saudi monarchy’s rule since its 1744 alliance with Ibn Wahhab brought the Al Saud family to control much of the Arabian
Peninsula (Fürtig 2002). The Iranian Revolution changed this dynamic entirely, with Khomeini’s rhetoric cementing Iran as a new powerful threat to Saudi Arabia’s Gulf hegemony. Iraq would play a significant role in the power balance until Saddam Hussein’s overthrow in 2003. In the time since then, a destabilised Iraq has put Saudi Arabia on the defensive as it seeks to counteract what it sees as growing Iranian power. The Iranian nuclear program is the most tangible of many security threats, but Iran’s ideological clout and potential influence over Shiite minorities in the Gulf States as well as its political influence in states outside the Gulf region also threatens Saudi hegemony. For Iran, foreign policy it is both an ideological and a security struggle. The Arab Spring has only added to the uncertainty that the Saudi leadership perpetually faces.

1.1. The rise of the anti-status quo

During the height of the Cold War, the Middle East and North Africa experienced internal backlash against regimes seeking to perpetuate the status quo, a condition that was not necessarily beneficial to many depending on the regime (specifically in non-rentier states). For many states, the “status quo” involved ruling families, militaries, or governments holding a monopoly on power and the distribution of wealth, as well as limited political and civil rights. The motivation behind these anti-status quo movements differed greatly, but all represented threats to certain regimes, especially the Gulf monarchies. With the rise in Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his pan-Arabist ideology, oil-rich monarchical states like Iran and Saudi Arabia were forced to react to prevent a revolutionary wave. Nasser represented the great political divide in the Middle East; his ideology was distinctly against the status quo and threatened to destabilise neighbouring states (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009; Fürtig 2002). And although the Saudi-Iranian relationship remained fragile in the face of growing nationalism in their respective countries, the 1960s saw some amicability, specifically when the shah offered open-ended aid and military assistance to Saudi Arabia following the Egyptian invasion of Yemen in 1962 (Fürtig 2002). In the 1950s and 1960s, the monarchies of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Yemen were all replaced, leaving some under dictators or juntas (Kitfield 2011). The rise of Ba’athism in Iraq also forced the two states closer together as they sought to bolster their own regime stability (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). The United States took advantage of this and encouraged improved relations between the countries in implementing its Cold War “twin-pillar” policy. This was a reaction to American worries of Soviet influence in strongly anti-imperialist states like Syria and Egypt.
As conservative, anti-communist monarchies, both Saudi Arabia and Iran served a crucial role in solidifying an American foothold in the region, particularly after the British departed from the Gulf in 1971. In return, they received political and economic support from the United States (Fürtig 2002).

The power vacuum that the British withdrawal created set the stage for future conflict; the Trucial States converged to form the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain emerged as a sovereign state. Both would go on to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in 1981. The US replacing the British as the security benefactor of many of the Gulf States was significant; it would go on to cause tension both between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as within the domestic sphere of both countries (Fürtig 2002).

1.2. The post-revolution rivalry

These tensions were most evident in the early 1980s with the hajj. Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1984 call for shared sovereignty over Mecca and Medina threatened the Saudi identity as the leader of Islam. Along with this, Iranian pilgrims clashed with Saudi security forces throughout the 1980s, with the Saudi government accusing Tehran of attempting to take the Grand Mosque in Mecca to declare Khomeini the leader of the Islamic world (Ekhtiari Amiri et al. 2011). As a result, Iran harboured deep resentment toward the Saudis for years, with Khomeini denouncing the ruling family and claiming that the Saudi king would not remain alive (Ekhtiari Amiri et al. 2011). These clashes highlighted the growing significance of religious sectarianism in the relationship between the two states. In the years following the revolution Gulf Arab regimes faced the risk of Iranian meddling.

The Hajj clashes as well as a 1981 coup plot in Bahrain under the Iranian-backed Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) caused many Gulf States to consider Iran a greater threat than Iraq under Saddam Hussein (Chubin 1992; Friedman 2012). Saudi Arabia reacted strongly to the coup attempt; much of this was born out of desperation as Iran seemed poised to grow more powerful. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia used its leverage in OPEC to further damage Iran’s already crippled oil output by setting an export quota (Fürtig 2002). Riyadh viewed the coup attempt as additional justification for its support for Iraq, with the Saudi Interior Minister condemning Iran as the “terrorist of the Gulf” and urging other Arab countries to similarly throw in support. Saudi Arabia gave $40 billion to Iraq to support its army (Ekhtiari Amiri et al. 2011). This was not a light decision, as the Saudi monarchy was
also concerned with Saddam Hussein’s ambitions; however, they viewed Iran as the greater threat (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). This would haunt them a decade later when a weakened post-war Iraq would invade Kuwait on irredentist claims. Saudi Arabia’s desperate moves to support Iraq and ensure its own security meant the possibility of long-term repercussions in the rivalry.

This was just the beginning of a decades-long rhetorical war between the states. The Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and the invasion of Kuwait forced Saudi Arabia to take steps in ensuring its own stability. The Saudis were concerned about Iran’s desire to export its revolution as well as its rhetoric disavowing the Saudi monarchy as pro-American and illegitimate. The formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council entrenched the remaining Gulf monarchies within the Saudi sphere of influence, though this was to the chagrin of some ruling families who worried about Saudi hegemony. The radical change in the political order would go on to affect American influence in the region as it expanded and contracted over the following decades. But for the Gulf monarchies, having the US as a security benefactor became crucial. For example, in 1991 during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US deployed hundreds of thousands of soldiers to protect the Saudi oil fields (Kitfield 2011). This was a move mutually beneficial to both states, though American military presence on Saudi Arabia would pose domestic problems as a result of ideology. The population resented American presence, with many radical Muslims questioning the legitimacy of the regime; they believed that the Saudi monarchy was allowing the desecration of Islam’s holiest lands (Fürtig 2002).

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran fluctuated over the following years with changes in direction, leadership, and ambition. The end of the Cold War saw Iran evolve from an ideological foreign policy to a more pragmatic one, in part because the state’s internal structure was devastated by the Iran-Iraq War (Ekhtiari Amiri et al. 2011; Naji and Jawan 2011). The change was most evident following the elections of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami to the Iranian presidency. Their foreign policies appeared more open compared to the rigid ideological approach of the Khomeini era; following both elections in 1989 and 1997 respectively there were even talks of a potential rapprochement between the US and Iran. While the first Bush administration was receptive to this possibility, the Clinton administration was not (Wright and Bakhsha 1997). Still, following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Iran allowed the US access to its airspace and provided crucial intelligence on the Taliban. Under Khatami, the Iranian government went so far as to offer the US a proposal to recognise Israel within its pre-1967 borders and cut off its
support for Hamas and Hezbollah (Sahimi 2009). Even during Ahmadinejad’s first term, Iran aimed to be accommodating in order to prevent interstate rivalries intensifying (Barzegar 2010). If anything, this offered a window into the potential for a mutually beneficial rapprochement.

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia sought closer ties with the Iranians after the Iran-Iraq war in light of the threat of a strong Iraq. Relations were at least superficially improved upon the election of Khatami (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). The Saudis have since worked on the sidelines with a nuanced “rollback” policy toward Iranian power in states like Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. Prior to the Arab Spring, they also embraced the Bush Administration’s plans of building a coalition of Middle Eastern states to blunt expanding Iranian influence (Gause 2007). But association with the US comes at a cost: the Saudis are well aware that, in the event of an American military confrontation with Iran, Saudi Arabia will be one of Iran’s first targets of retaliation (Gause 2007). With Iran continuously going forward with its nuclear program in spite of sanctions, tensions have only been inflamed.

1.3. Outside powers and security concerns

The nuclear issue presents problems for Saudi Arabia not just in terms of security, but on the domestic level as well. Public opinion in the Gulf States, boosted by pan-Arab norms, looks upon Iran’s nuclear ambitions favourably. This highlights the dichotomy between the pro-American Gulf monarchies and their anti-American population (El-Hokayem and Legrenzi 2006). President Ahmadinejad’s virulent anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric has caught the attention of some in the Arab Gulf States, with many believing that anti-proliferation led by the US is an extension of Western imperialism (El-Hokayem and Legrenzi 2006). Because of this sentiment, GCC leaders are forced to tread carefully around the issue, relying heavily on the US to counteract growing Iranian power. By cooperating extensively with the United States, the Gulf State monarchies are neutered in their rhetorical approach toward Israel; this can provide fuel to their opponents who claim their illegitimacy. Iran has no such constraints in its rhetoric and takes full advantage of it. There is also the obvious concern of a nuclear Iran provoking an arms race with Saudi Arabia, but the Iranian perception is that it is simply joining an existing arms race and continues to resent what it feels was the world’s passive reaction to Iraq’s use of WMD during the Iran-Iraq war (El-Hokayem and Legrenzi 2006). However, Riyadh and Washington often differ on ways to approach the Iranian issue. Many
of the Gulf State elites believe any sort of direct conflict would be catastrophic as it would stir up sectarian resistance and destabilise the region. The best approach, they argue, is through negotiation and concessions (Shlapentokh 2010). This is an acknowledgment of the belief that Iran is not some sort of rogue state so incensed with ideology that it is incapable of being a rational actor. There are concerns that Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon would lead to a regional arms race, with Saudi Arabia at the forefront. The Saudis would likely purchase a nuclear weapon outright than develop its own, as it has the financial clout to do so and this would prevent outside strikes on its developmental facilities (Baghat 2011). This scenario is only possible of the United States utterly fails in its self-imposed responsibilities as Saudi Arabia’s security guarantor; such a course of action for the Saudis would be extremely risky.

The United States is not the only foreign power with a foothold in the region. Iran has its own powerful backer in Russia, at least to an extent. It is particularly worth mentioning because it adds depth to the US-Saudi security relationship. With Russia looming in the background and using its position in the UN Security Council (UNSC) to shield Iran from further punishment, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry grows more complex. Both Russia and Iran share similar ambitions of hedging US power and have potentially mutual economic interests (such as forming a natural gas cartel), but they are constantly at odds on the nuclear issue; it is Russia’s official position as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty that Iran cannot be allowed to develop nuclear weapons (Katz 2008; Smith 2007). And yet Iran still has powerful friends in the UNSC, as both Russia and China have moved to protect Iran from even harsher sanctions. Russia in particular has taken a cautious approach, being reluctant to antagonise Iran and potentially threaten relations (Smith 2007). Moscow has attempted to rein in Tehran and convince the regime that it is dependent on Russia for protection against the wrath of the UNSC. While Western powers criticised Moscow for its attempts to block harsher sanctions, Tehran was frustrated with Russia’s willingness to discuss among the UNSC the possibility of additional sanctions in the first place (Katz 2008). The Russians have attempted to alleviate the issue many times over the years, but they have made little progress. Still, Russia has national interests in the Middle East just as the US does, and Iran benefits greatly from having a powerful backer.

Gause (2007) highlights two different levels on which the political landscape is perceived in Saudi Arabia today, specifically regarding Iraq following the 2003 invasion. The ruling family views the Iraqi situation as a power balance struggle, while much of the public
perceives it as a broader Sunni-Shi’ite conflict. The Saudis had advised the United States against the invasion out of fears that a broken Iraq would only empower Iran (Kitfield 2011). There have also been assertions of private Saudi financial support sustaining the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, and though it is likely, there is no hard evidence (Gause 2007). In doing so, Saudi citizens who fund the insurgency are taking a significant risk similar to the Saudi government’s support for Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. By funding the insurgents, the sponsors risk abetting the destabilisation of the region, which runs counteract to their hopes of hedging Iranian power and contributing to Sunni dominance. Any semblance of perception of the ruling families in the Gulf monarchies supporting Sunni insurgencies, no matter how far removed, risks alienating their Shiite populations because it is seen as strictly an ethnic, ideological matter rather than one born out of pragmatism. There are substantial minorities in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE (Friedman 2012). All pose a potential risk to state stability, whether tied to Iran or not, particularly in times of economic trouble.

One thing remains consistent, however: when it comes to the Gulf state power structure, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been in a virtual Cold War, with each taking steps to bolster their own influence in neighbouring states while simultaneously chipping away at the other’s perceived power. Their competition manifests itself in the internal conflicts of neighbouring states that both seek to lure into their sphere of influence. Bahrain is a great example of this phenomenon, both in terms of religious ideology and power politics.

2. The rivalry and Bahrain

The small island country of Bahrain has been a focal point for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry; the crises its Sunni monarchy faces against its majority Shiite population offer an explicit glimpse into both Saudi and Iranian ambitions. On one hand, Iran wants to spread its revolutionary ideals and consolidate its potential leadership among co-religionist populations. It also wants to bolster its influences in neighbouring states at the expense of Saudi Arabia. Bahrain is a prime target for this. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia’s national security depends on maintaining the status quo. An overthrow of the Al Khalifa family and the rise of a pro-Iranian or even a simply anti-Saudi Bahraini government would be catastrophic for Saudi Arabia’s national security and its hegemony among the Gulf States. It would lose confidence among allied states worried about growing Iranian power. But Iran’s involvement has not always been clear in the many internal crises that Bahrain has faced. The 1981 coup attempt
had clear evidence implicating Iranian meddling, but the 2011 uprising has not been as clear. Despite the lack of evidence, the belief by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain that Iran incited protests in the country has significantly affected the dynamic. Bahrain is thus a very useful case study in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

2.1. Before the Iranian revolution

Bahraini sovereignty has long been under siege. For the past four centuries multiple empires have competed for control over the island, including the Ottomans, the Persians, and the British (Cordesman 1997). Its strategic importance represents a massive security concern for Bahrain and multiple surrounding states. It is eight minutes flying time from Iran and thirty from Iraq; it is also linked to Saudi Arabia by the sixteen mile King Fahd Causeway built in 1986 so that the Saudi military can act quickly to reinforce the Bahraini regime in the event of an emergency (Cordesman 1997; Henderson 2011b). Mabon (2012: 92) demonstrates Bahrain’s relative importance in writing that “Bahrain also provides an additional area of interest in exploring the nature of the regional security system and the debate as to whether the security of the Gulf could be secured without the help of external actors.” Bahrain’s population is majority Shiite with the number between 70-75 percent. The Al Khalifa monarchy is Sunni and bolsters its position with Saudi support to counteract perceived Iranian influence among its Shiite population (Mabon 2012).

Bahrain struggled to consolidate its government and create a thriving independent state after the British withdrawal in 1971. The immediate aftermath of the withdrawal prompted the shah to renew claims to Bahrain, but Saudi Arabia was against this. Eventually the shah proclaimed the Bahraini right to self-determination as an act of “saving face” (Mabon 2012: 86-87). Bahrain drafted a constitution and established a unicameral parliament in 1973, but the new legislative body was at odds with the ruling family in that it refused to pass laws and seemed intent on severing ties with the American naval base that the ruling family believed was critical to national security; as such, the Emir dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution (Alhasan 2011). The overarching concern for the Bahraini regime was retaining power, and a parliament that did not go along with its national security aims left the state vulnerable to outside powers like Iran, at least in the eyes of the ruling family. These authoritarian measures set the stage for future protests, particularly with the 2011 uprising in which Shiite protestors sought to establish a constitutional monarchy (Abdo and Ali 2011).
Iran’s irredentist attitude toward Bahrain was clear even under the shah in 1957 when the parliament referred to the country as Iran’s fourteenth province, a reference to the Safavid Persian Empire’s conquest of the island in 1602 (O’Sullivan 2011; Cordesman 1997). This sentiment was echoed in 2009 when a senior Iranian governmental official and former speaker of the Majlis (parliament) said Bahrain had been Iran’s fourteenth province until 1970 (Khalaji 2011). Bahrain was concerned about the perceived Iranian threat despite the fact that the shah had officially recognised its sovereignty even before the British withdrawal; as such, it turned to the United States and Saudi Arabia for support (Cordesman 1997). The perceived Iranian influence over Shiites across the region inflamed tensions even further, and Bahrain’s dependence on Saudi Arabia has rendered the ruling Al Khalifa vulnerable to the whims of Saudi leadership.

2.2. Sectarianism and the Iranian threat

The Islamic Republic’s vocal calls for the exportation of its revolution have long been a concern for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, who each have substantial Shiite populations. Though the rhetoric was more pronounced in the 1980s under Khomeini and before the devastation of the Iran-Iraq War, sectarian tensions still plague ruling monarchies. The Sunni Al Khalifa regime owes much of its stability to Saudi support. The Saudis prop up the regime by giving it oil to sell on the market, as Bahrain itself lacks the oil reserves of other GCC states (Cordesman 1997). This was especially crucial during the Arab Spring in 2011 as the GCC monarchies moved quickly to use their wealth for handouts to increase regime legitimacy, something that, without Saudi support, Bahrain would be unable to do (Friedman 2012). The Al Khalifa family also maintains its political marginalisation of the Shiite majority through heavy gerrymandering (Henderson 2011b).

The Shiite question is the major non-security aspect of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry; it is an ideological matter with security-related consequences. Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority population is around ten percent. Shiites form a local majority in the oil-rich Eastern Province, through which about ten percent of the world’s oil is produced daily (Henderson 2011b). Beginning with the Shiite uprising in the town of Qatif in the Eastern Province in 1979, the Saudi ruling family has been wary of Iranian influence among its Shiite minority in the Eastern Province; this was exacerbated with the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996 (Kaye and Wehrey 2007). Arab Saudi and Bahraini Shiites have close ties with one another despite
being viewed with suspicion by the ruling elites, though many are cautious toward and do not identify with Persian Iran (Henderson 2011b). However, in the case of Qatif immediately following Khomeini’s ascension, Shiite protestors held posters of the Ayatollah and denounced the Saudi regime (Friedman 2012). It is possible that this was a result of the revolutionary fervour permeating throughout the region rather than the Shiite minority explicitly identifying with Iran on anything more than a superficial level despite being co-religionists. Whichever the case, the perception of Iranian influence among Shiites remains.

Shiite Islamist groups first cropped up in the early 1970s following Bahrain’s declaration of independence, with groups flourishing in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Saudi Eastern Province, and Bahrain (Alhasan 2011). The IFLB, formed in the mid-1970s, aimed to overthrow the Al Khalifa family and establish a theocratic independent Bahraini state; one of its leaders, Hadi al-Modarresi, sought to export the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Alhasan 2011). The group was behind the infamous 1981 failed coup attempt that was largely backed by Iran. Prior to this, Bahrain had been strongly supporting Iraq in its war with Iran (Cordesman 1997). The group proclaimed its allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini, but much of the fallout and anti-Iranian sentiment came from the Bahraini regime’s conclusion that Iran provided the IFLB with weapons; indeed, Iran allowed extensive media and propaganda assistance in allowing the IFLB to establish offices in Tehran, and many of the fake Bahraini police uniforms provided to the plotters were found to be made in Iran (Alhasan 2011). Many of the IFLB had also trained in Iran and received funding to carry out the coup (Cordesman 1997). This is in contrast to the Arab Spring protests, in which evidence Iranian involvement was scant but equally as strongly suspected by GCC states. In the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, the Gulf monarchies were at their most vulnerable than perhaps they ever have been. But it is important to note that it was not solely Iranian meddling that brought about the coup attempt. The IFLB had received support from Shiites in the north in Diraz and A’ali. With 73 people on trial for the coup attempt, the regime had to be careful not to foment outrage among the Shiite majority, and suppressed demonstrations surrounding the trials (Cordesman 1997). It also attempted to expand economic opportunities for the Shiite majority in order to placate the populace and prevent future insurrections (Cordesman 1997).
2.3. Bahrain’s internal problems

Subsequent unrest in Bahrain since the death of Khomeini has been a result of economic problems, though the Bahraini government has still accused Iran of providing support to anti-government protestors over the years (Cordesman 1997). The status of Shiites in Bahrain continues to contribute to its instability. The regime’s authoritarianism and divisive policies has been the root cause of protests over the years despite Iranian rhetoric (Abdo and Ali 2011). It is a vicious cycle; since Bahrain lacks the oil revenue of the other Sunni monarchies with significant Shiite populations, its regime is extremely vulnerable in times of economic hardship even as the ruling family stubbornly clings to power and offers insufficient reforms. As such, Saudi Arabia continues to prop up the Al Khalifa family, with King Abdullah telling President Obama following the March 2011 Saudi military intervention in Bahrain that Saudi Arabia would never allow Shiites to rule the island (Henderson 2011a). The presence of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain is not among the stated concerns of protestors, and the Bahraini government is desperate to retain the US presence (Henderson 2011a).

In Bahrain, much of the Shiite population resents the government not because of Iranian meddling, but because of economic disadvantage and lack of political freedoms, a second-class status that was bolstered rather than alleviated by King Hamad’s 2002 constitutional reforms (Henderson 2011a). These reforms began in 2000 in response to decades of calls for political reform. A new, vaguely worded national charter was introduced that promised a new legislative body similar to the one that had been dissolved by the Emir in the mid-1970s. It was approved by 98.4 percent of voters (Ehteshami and Wright 2007). The reforms turned out to be superficial, with the Emir taking on the title of “king” and introducing the new bicameral legislature that was essentially neutered; it gave the appearance of reform, but the Al Khalifa family had consolidated its own power, much to the chagrin of political opponents (Ehteshami and Wright 2007). The reforms contributed to the basis upon which the dissatisfaction that was seen in Arab Spring arose. Bahraini opposition in 2011 called for the abolition of the constitution and the resignation of the controversial Prince Khalifa as prime minister (Friedman 2012). Around half of the cabinet is composed of members of the royal family, and the whole of the cabinet is appointed by the king (Al Jazeera 2010).

Bahrain’s Shiites are also resentful of foreign labour in the country. The foreign worker population swelled from 1971 to 1993, with native Bahrainis initially making up 83 percent of the total population and dropping to 66 percent after just two decades. In the 1990s this
caused competition with impoverished Shiites seeking job opportunities, and the government failed in its efforts to alleviate the strain. Sunnis also benefited from higher average incomes compared to Shiites, which allowed Sunnis to gain skills and wealth to maintain power over the majority population and leaving the Shiite community to suffer the effects of economic recession (Cordesman 1997). However, the foreign worker population still provides the government some stability. This was clear during the 2011 uprising; unlike other countries in which some in the military were sympathetic to protestors, Bahrain’s military is comprised by a majority of non-Bahrainis who have no connection to the native population (El-Din Haseeb 2011). There were violent attacks against the foreign worker population (mainly South Asian) by protestors in 2011. This was partially because of the association with foreigners and the brutal security forces, but also because of the belief that foreigners (in this case Pakistanis) were taking jobs that native Bahrainis should hold (Bassiouni et al. 2011: 370).

Despite the clearly economically-driven domestic turmoil in some Gulf States, there is a genuine perception among the GCC regimes that Shiite Islamism is tied to Iran. While this sentiment is not without historical basis, the lack of evidence means that regimes must act on the assumption that Iran has substantial influence over their Shiite populations. This of course carries the risk of alienating Shiite minorities who might not be under substantial Iranian influence today.

2.4. Bahrain and the GCC

The Arab Spring reflected what truly plagues Bahrain: its internal politics grounded in social inequality and governmental corruption. An independent commission that investigated the Bahraini uprising delivered a report in November 2011 that found no solid evidence of Iranian meddling. Indeed, it asserted that Bahraini security forces were responsible for torture and human rights violations. It also found that intervening GCC troops did not commit human rights violations (Bakri 2011; Bassiouni et al. 2011). There were also accounts of backlash by the Shiite majority against the Sunni minority (Bassiouni et al. 2011); however, it is more likely to do with the economic disparity brought about by the government than any sort of sectarian religious differences perpetuated in the narrative that both Saudi Arabia and Iran embrace.

The Saudi intervention had negative consequences despite quelling an overthrow. It allowed the Al Khalifa regime to use violence to suppress and intimidate the protestors and allowed
Iran rhetorical benefits as it claimed kinship with Bahraini Shiites, regardless of its actual influence among the population (Abdo and Ali 2011). Still, Saudi involvement is a key factor that has protected the Bahraini regime since the state’s independence; unlike similar small states vulnerable to the predatory whims of regional powers, Bahrain has integrated itself into the GCC political structure, an entity that finds Arab Gulf States offering mutual support to one another in order to maintain the status quo.

There is a regional support network that operates under the auspice of protecting all participating regimes under the assumption that, if one regime were to fall, it could lead to a regional collapse (Ehteshami and Wright 2007). This gives Bahrain greater strategic importance than a non-monarchical state like Ba’athist Iraq, as the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, though presenting problems in its own right, did not pose as much of a risk of destabilisation in Saudi Arabia as fall of Bahrain would. Evidence of this sentiment came when Arab news outlets like Al-Jazeera played a significant role in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions but were much more restrained in their depiction of protests in the Arab monarchies, particularly in Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia (El-Din Haseeb 2011). This support network has become more crucial for the Gulf States particularly since the Arab Spring. The Arab monarchies are distinct with their vast oil wealth. Some like Saudi Arabia have majority populations who depend on maintaining the status quo for their own livelihood (Ehteshami and Wright 2007). These oil-rich states, many of which are welfare rentier states, are separate from the republican dictatorships that were toppled across North Africa in 2011. They maintain a semblance of legitimacy through careful policymaking; GCC ruling families view themselves as the proprietors of their countries, and allowing too much power to fall into the hands of civil society or failing to provide economic opportunities for the populace would disrupt the regional balance of power (Ehteshami and Wright 2007). Their continued reign depends on the consistent influx of oil money, and the many factors that could disrupt this flow all pose security concerns for the Saudi regime in particular. The GCC is also fundamentally a coalition of monarchies, as is evidenced by the invitations extended to Jordan and Morocco in 2011 despite their lack of oil money and regional distance from the Gulf. These invitations are seen as an attempt primarily to bolster the security of the regimes involved rather increase economic gains (Al-Khalidi 2011).

Bahrain, of course, has the distinction of lacking both oil wealth and a placated majority like its neighbours. It is thus the arguably most susceptible to Iranian meddling, real or perceived, and this leaves Saudi Arabia and its neighbours in a defensive position. In March 2011 GCC
leaders pledged $20 billion to Bahrain and Oman (Oman being the other GCC state without major oil revenue) to support socioeconomic development; this was seen as an attempt to counteract perceived Iranian meddling in the Gulf region (Friedman 2012), though it could have equally been an attempt to take pressure off of the Al Khalifa family by temporarily alleviating Bahrain’s severe economic problems. Iran has the advantage over the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, due to the fact that the GCC states have no way of pinpointing the Iranian government’s overarching intentions, and are thus forced to prepare for the worst. This is where international relations theory becomes most relevant. It is needed to properly analyze the rivalry dynamic and create a cohesive narrative.

3. Analyzing perception and theoretical application in the Gulf order

International relations theory has become well-suited to address the intricacies of geopolitics. Realism, particularly neorealism, has been an oft-used tool for dissecting the international scope of Middle East politics in recent decades. Neoliberalism (or neoliberal institutionalism) also provides insight in to the modern landscape. In general, the political nuances of the region provide ample evidence for a balance of power dynamic; this is particularly true when one considers the region’s strategic importance to outside powers. Realist theory, with all of its inadequacies, has for decades survived the onslaught of competing theories and assertions of irrelevance in the post-Cold War environment. Indeed, for years the Saudi-Iranian rivalry itself appeared to be a classic case of realist power politics between two monarchies, and could be well explained through a positivist neorealist perspective in a case in which state motivation was clear. The two states maneuvered to gain regional advantages at the expense of one another. They used their sway to accumulate greater power for themselves, often at the advantage of weaker states. Their power was measurable, material, and tangible. And yet, simultaneously, they were heavily influenced by the structure of the international system. The Cold War forced them together as the bipolar international structure coalesced.

The Iranian Revolution did not eliminate the security struggle or change its foundation; it simply added new dimensions to the rivalry that cannot be explained by structure. This is particularly true when one compares and contrasts Iran’s policy toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States under the shah versus under the Islamic Republic; as stated earlier, the competition for influence only continued. The driving force behind the rivalry dynamic is state perception and how this reflects on behaviour. It is beneficial to approach the Saudi-
Iranian rivalry since the end of the Cold War and the perception phenomenon with a social constructivist lens, as this offers dimensions of analysis marginalised by rationalist theories like neorealism and neoliberalism. As methodological approaches, the rationalist and constructivist approaches are not mutually exclusive, and an analysis that engages both approaches can be beneficial. Indeed, the two approaches can be complementary (Fearon and Wendt 2002).

The major point of contention in the Saudi-Iranian security struggle is Iran’s nuclear program, which threatens regional security if for no other reason than the fact that neighbouring states feel threatened. The perception of the Iranian threat has led to fears of a regional nuclear arms race. This dynamic is easily compared to the American-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War when placed in these terms, and can be analyzed from a systemic level. But there are other social factors contributing to the rivalry outside of security. As the undertones of revolution and religious fervour have permeated throughout the region over the decades, a more nuanced approach needed to properly characterise the rivalry dynamic. The social constructs of the two states are tantamount to their identity and therefore their roles as actors. The Arab Spring demonstrated that domestic political structures hold incredible relevance to foreign policy in an increasingly globalising world as unsatisfied populaces revolted against their governments. Bahrain’s situation specifically is a complicated amalgam of power struggles and social unrest. The Saudi and Iranian responses to the Bahraini crisis were culminations of both their internal structures and the international structure; this is something not adequately addressed by realist theory and it is therefore necessary to consider competing theories for greater insight.

3.1. Structural realism and rationalism

One of the central tenets of realism is that sovereign states are the primary actors on an anarchical international stage. As actors, they are assumed to be inherently rational and primarily concerned with survival and self-interest. Realism is a pessimistic theory that views international cooperation skeptically compared to contemporary liberalism; while it holds that it is possible in the short-term, concerns about relative gains come into the mix and prevent any long-term, mutually beneficial cooperation. This is different from the neoliberal belief that absolute gains are achievable, and that relative gains as a concept do not significantly hold back cooperation (Reus-Smit 2009).
Depending on the strand of realism, the unit can be examined on multiple levels: the system level, the state level, or the individual level (Donnelly 2009). Different strands of realism stress different concepts; in classical realism, for example, human nature is a prime concern and the approach is more philosophical than empirical. The empirically-minded positivist epistemology gained traction in the latter half of the twentieth century. In a sense, it eschewed concerns with morality and aimed for objectivity by using a scientifically-inspired approach toward analyzing the international system; this approach, of course, works more effectively depending on the issue (Nicholson 1996).

Realism faced challenges in the 20th century as a glut of alternative theories cropped up. In what was seen as a fresh take on the theory, Kenneth Waltz laid the foundation of positivist structural realism (neorealism) by largely ignoring metaphysical questions of human nature. His theory was an ambitious attempt at creating a method through which minimal assumptions and empirically verifiable hypotheses about international relations could be made (Reus-Smit 2009). Waltz lays out two fundamental levels of analysis: state level and international level. He refers to the former as “unit-level” and “reductionist” (Wendt 1999). He argues that political structures (domestic or international) are defined by distinct categories including ordering principles, differentiation of functions, and capability distribution; in addition, international orders are anarchic and structures differ only by capability distribution with minimal functional differentiation (Donnelly 2009). And because states are units distinguished by capability rather than function (a characteristic present at the state/domestic level), the dynamic of the international system can change based upon the “great powers” within the system. This therefore alters state capabilities and behaviour. He states that “Power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units. Although capabilities are attributes of units, the distribution of capabilities across units is not” (Waltz 1979: 98). He reiterates the level-based distinction between domestic and foreign politics, claiming that domestic politics (state level analysis) are ordered and well within a state’s control, while foreign politics (international level) are imposed upon the state by the international structure and out of the state’s control (Waltz 1979). This would therefore de-emphasise the importance of state-level politics and interaction because they do not significantly influence politics on the international level; it also re-asserts states as the sole systemic actors and devalues the potential for international institutions. Keohane (1984: 245) offers the neoliberal approach in arguing the importance of institutions and interaction in saying “by clustering issues together in the same forums over a long period of time, they help
bring governments into continuing interaction…reducing incentives to cheat and enhancing the value of reputation,” which over time will lead to “decentralised enforcement founded on the principle of reciprocity.” This is a phenomenon present in institutions like the GCC, although for now the institution remains dominated by a hegemonic Saudi Arabia.

Much of Waltz’s observations are born out of the Cold War dynamic. At the time of his writing *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, the consensus had been that the United States’s power and capabilities had waned since the 1950s and that the Soviet Union’s power had grown. The Brezhnev Doctrine and Soviet foreign presence only fueled this perception. But the neorealist argument would contend that it was the bipolar dynamic of the system, not the nature of the states involved, which caused the Cold War; this is a key point when discussing inter-state rivalries (Donnelly 2009). Donnelly (2009) notes that neorealism downplays the internal differences of states by citing US animosity toward the USSR until the onset of World War II, which required the two great powers to work together to bring back balance to the international order. He writes that later Cold War proxy conflicts were competitions of influence, not ideological struggle. But he is critical of Waltz’s discounting of state motives outside of plain survival.

Neorealism, like neoliberalism, falls under the umbrella of rationalist theories. Both make assumptions about political actors, state or otherwise. They assume that actors are rational, self-interested units with interests that are exogenous to social interaction; actors operate within the system with pre-determined interests that are not substantially influenced by social interaction (Reus Smit 2009). State interest becomes a given in these theories to perhaps an atavistic level. Critical theory attempts to downplay the empirical approach and deconstructs basic assumptions about international relations, leaving room for post-postivist approaches (Reus-Smit 2009).

The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era for international relations theory; this was in part a reaction to the fact that “experts” were caught completely off-guard by the end of the Cold War (Cox 2007). This led to the rise of the social constructivist critique, which is critical of neorealism and structuralism. Alexander Wendt (1999) argues that neorealism’s inadequacies are too great; that neorealism cannot adequately explain structural change, and that it cannot generate falsifiable hypotheses congenital to positivist approaches. He states that the classical realist approach allows for more variation and therefore more cogent, developed analyses. Wendt describes neorealist-influenced thinkers as
“post-Waltzians” who utilise aspects of structural realism and attempt to specify it, in contrast to neoliberals who take elements of Waltzian structural theory and stress the importance of international cooperation. Neorealists and neoliberals both hold a materialist view in believing that power (defined broadly but rooted in military capability) is the driving force behind international politics; power is an objective entity (Jackson and Sørenson 2010). Both make similar assumptions about state behaviour and, in assuming states to be rational, imply a degree of objectivity in the theoretical approach (Reus-Smit 2009). They consider identity and interest to be innate to states, while constructivism attempts to re-evaluate these concepts (Viotti and Kauppi 2010: 277).

The concept of objectivity in international relations is criticised by constructivists. They advocate an ideational approach and argue that the international system is a human construction made up of ideas rather than an objective, rigid structure utilised in traditional materialist approaches (Jackson and Sørenson 2010). Indeed, subjectivity provides the basis for international interaction. The system is structured in such a way as to influence state behaviour, but not necessarily to predict it. The absence of objectivity does not entirely negate traditional rationalist approaches, but it raises questions about the extent to which certain assumptions about state behaviour should be made.

3.2. Perception and constructivist critique of the rivalry

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is best analyzed with elements from both the rationalist and constructivist approaches; it is important to note that the two approaches are not entirely mutually exclusive. The neorealist analysis applies only to an extent. The “levels of analysis” approach has some relevance but does not fully explain state behaviour. Their competition was born out of the bipolar dynamic of the anarchic system. Although they competed for regional hegemony, the greater threats of Nasserism and other such anti-status quo movements forced them together to balance out the region. The two states had common interests and common foes that threatened the balance of power. But Waltz’s definition of power in the sense of comparing state capabilities becomes a superficial observation unable to properly analyze the Saudi-Iranian dynamic. The Saudi and Iranian capabilities, even when using that word to its broadest extent, do not solely define their power. Power begets the potential for gaining advantage; military and economic capabilities are simply insufficient to determine what drives Saudi Arabia and Iran.
An example of this outside of the Gulf States lies in the Yemeni conflict. It is unique in that it can be argued that Saudi-Iranian interests in the conflict have little to do with power-balancing and much more to do with ideology. Starting in 2004, minority Zaydi Shiite religious extremists out of the northern Saada governate (bordering Saudi Arabia) led an armed insurrection against the Yemeni government and appealed to potentially sympathetic Shiite parties like Iran and Hamas. The civil conflict is localised and complex, but over time it became another indirect front for the Saudi-Iranian competition for regional influence. Iran has provided political and media support for the minority group, causing tensions with Saudi Arabia and Yemen who both fear further destabilisation (Winter 2011). However, like in Bahrain in 2011, there is no evidence of direct Iranian involvement. The ordeal demonstrates the decreased importance of capability. Iran potentially benefits from keeping civil conflicts alive without getting directly involved or being seen as getting involved, as the perception of direct involvement would sour sentiment against Iran by giving neighbouring states reason to bolster their own capabilities. Appearing aggressive regardless of capability would damage the influence Iran has, through both pragmatic and ideological means, attempted to cultivate, as such an appearance can promote backlash (Walt 1987). In this case its power is derived from its self-proclaimed leadership position of Shiites everywhere, even if Zaydism is theologically different from Iranian Twelver Shiism. Emboldening minorities to destabilise anti-Iranian regimes in the region contributes to Iranian power and is done so through ideological rather than military or economic means.

Robert Jervis’s 1976 *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* details a number of factors contributing to state behaviour that are generally not adequately addressed by rationalist theories and can be supplemented with a constructivist approach. He uses twentieth century examples to draw out the differences among states, using state-level and system-level examples. He examines the importance of the intentions of states as well as their perception, and how this affects their behaviour. One major concept he touches upon is status quo among states and how it influences policy. When applying Jervis’s observations on perception one can find both support and negation of the material, structural approach rather than a social one.

This plays into a wider dimension that the neorealist and, to a lesser degree, neoliberal analysis inadequately covers: perception. Walt (1987) attempted to elaborate on the neorealist approach through assessments of intentions and ideology (Wendt 1999). However perception, though influenced by structure, is not restrained by it and is not always rational. States are
incapable of making an objective assessment of reality without all of the facts, but even with all of the facts their interpretation of them is subjective. Jervis writes that “to argue that the international environment determines a state’s behaviour is to assert that all states react similarly to the same objective external situation” (Jervis 1976: 18). Saudi Arabia and Bahrain cannot make a completely accurate summation of the Iranian threat so long as Iran’s intentions remain mysterious. The best they can do is assuming intentions. States must adjust their behaviour based on the facts and notions that they have. The mere knowledge that a state is lacking information can lead that state to act irrationally. In methodological terms, critical theorists would go so far as to argue that knowledge is a biased construct resulting from cultural perspective (Jackson and Sørenson 2010). This runs counter to the belief that states and decision-makers have an accurate view of the world and that misperception is an anomaly (Jervis 1976). Saudi Arabia and therefore Bahrain are forced to assume the worst in regards to Iranian intentions and model their behaviour accordingly, because assuming less leaves greater potential for loss. To them, their behaviour is subjectively rational. They are acting within the system based on the information they have available. But, as is generally the case in the international arena, their actions have unforeseen and often adverse effects, both politically and socially, that cannot always be predicted through epistemology. States are easily capable of misperceiving exactly how their actions will affect the status quo as the international system grows increasingly interconnected (Jervis 1976). As a result, it is a mistake to assume rationality among state actors and discount the importance of social constructs when analyzing behaviour.

Like Saudi Arabia and Iran today, the US and the USSR had differing ideologies they were attempting to peddle in spreading their influence. The difference was their willingness to run the risks that go with spreading domestic ideology (Jervis 1976). To this extent, the international structure limits or at least affects behaviour regardless of internal state structure. As a status quo power, Saudi Arabia is not as willing to engage in risky behaviour as Iran because it benefits heavily from the status quo. Jervis lays out a table comparing the “costs willing to pay to defend values possessed” versus the “costs willing to pay to change status quo” (Jervis 1976: 51). The concept of “status quo” becomes pertinent in volatile regions; the Middle East is unique in that the livelihood of several monarchical governments relies on interdependence and careful policymaking to prevent a revolutionary wave. The table demonstrates Jervis’s penchant for laying out theoretical concepts in historical terms. For example, he labels Japan in the 1930s as “high” for both values, compared to Nazi Germany.
which was highly willing to change the status quo but low in willing to “defend values possessed,” something he chalked up to Hitler’s all-or-nothing attitude toward Germany’s future as a world power (Jervis 1976). In this context, Iran is high for both values. It is not a status quo power in the same vein as Saudi Arabia or the United States, and is therefore more open to taking risks because it has less to lose in this regard. Its revolutionary values also lay the foundation for the state, and its desire to export these values to neighbouring states like Bahrain help to define its status as an actor. Prior to the revolution it relied just as heavily on maintaining the status quo as the Saudis do today. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is highly willing to defend its values and low in its willingness to change the status quo. The placement of these states on such a table is heavily influenced by the current international structure with the United States as the regional hegemon. With the US or even Russia removed from the equation, behaviour can shift. Iran would have greater freedom in exercising its power and uprooting the status quo. This is in line with the “great power relations” of structural realism, but even that discounts perception.

Indeed, the perception of the status quo by the leadership of both states is more relevant than any sort of attempt at an objective take on the status quo, because the nature of the concept is subjectively based. For example, the Gulf Arab states recognise the need for Iran to play a constructive role with the US to prevent abject failure in Afghanistan and Iraq (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). It has the capability to, without using any sort of direct military power, completely derail efforts toward building viable democratic regimes in both countries. Thus, the need for cooperation is evident, but the extent to which it is possible is up for debate. Iran’s leadership appears to be aware of this, and is wary of seeming too outwardly antagonistisic. Upsetting the status quo too rapidly could be just as damaging to Iran as it would be for neighbouring regimes. This makes the perception of its activities in Bahrain a major issue.

4. Theoretical approaches to the rivalry in Bahrain

Bahrain’s internal politics must be addressed when discussing its role in the international system. Its politics are precisely what led to the 2011 protests, despite governmental accusations of Iranian meddling. The state’s motives may have a foundation in survival, but the Al Khalifa family is primarily interested in maintaining its own power even at the expense of state sovereignty, as is evident with its extreme dependence on Saudi Arabia.
Bahrain’s problems are endogenous; they are less at the whim of the shifting international system and far more vulnerable to the failures of their own social structure. Bahrain is a monarchy in a region where monarchies thrive off of oil revenue. It does not have that benefit. This falls under the capabilities explanation of neorealism; that is, states are functionally alike and culture and ideology are not major influences on behaviour (Jackson and Sørenson 2010). It therefore has to rely on other means to maintain stability. But its internal structure is equally as important as its capabilities.

4.1. The importance of internal state structure

Bahrain’s most pressing issue is the treatment of its massive Shiite majority as second-class citizens. Rationalist theories do not give proper credence to the notion that a state’s internal structure can radically affect its behaviour and its capabilities. The ruling family’s actions seem counterintuitive; as the government it represents the state on the systemic level. The monarchy has aimed for shoddy short-term solutions put together by a government desperately attempting to keep its position of power. The ruling family has motivations different from other governments, even the ones in the GCC. While these motivations are ultimately rooted in survival, the nuances of Bahrain’s problems and its uniqueness as a state are significant. Its problems are a result of the incredibly poor shape of the Bahraini economy, and are arguably not significantly influenced by Iran despite its revanchist rhetoric. The issues of foreign labour, economic disparity, unemployment among native Bahrainis, lack of oil revenue, and a system of rigid social stratification that widely discriminates against the Shiite population all contribute to unrest (Peterson 2002). Despite its perceived lack of influence, Bahrain’s geostrategic importance has both regional powers and the hegemonic United States heavily invested in maintaining or disrupting its internal stability. King Hamad’s reforms were an attempt to alleviate grievances, but the uprising nine years later demonstrated that little progress has been made. Outside of domestic turmoil, Bahrain’s international role is largely defined through the GCC and its alliances with the United States; because of this, its capabilities are extremely limited. If the major social issues of the country were alleviated, the Bahraini government would have far more maneuverability. As such, the state’s marginalisation is only partly because of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the decentralised anarchic international system.
4.2. The role of international regimes

The Al Khalifa family has managed to bolster its stability by integrating with the GCC, thus giving the government staying power. Contrary to basic realist assumptions, cooperation in this context is viewed as a requirement among the GCC states because of the belief that one monarchy falling would create a domino effect. Without cooperation, regime survival is threatened. This is just as much a matter of perception among the GCC states as it is strategic. The belief that Shiite minorities would be empowered by the fall of a Sunni monarchy in a neighbouring state is predominant; rather than taking a cautious, case-by-case approach, GCC states take a blanket approach in ensuring the stability of all members out of fear of destabilisation.

The distribution of oil wealth by the oil-rich states to Oman and Bahrain in March 2011 (Friedman 2012) demonstrates the belief in solidarity. The only time the perception of relative gains comes into the mix is when smaller states show concern of Saudi Arabian domination of the Gulf. The extent to which it poses a problem for greater cooperation remains to be seen, but the sentiment was evident in 2012 when the Saudis proposed creating a federation out of the GCC states; in fact, Bahrain was the only GCC member other than Saudi Arabia enthusiastic about the proposal (Fahim and Kirkpatrick 2012). This, coupled with the economic and military support Saudi Arabia provides to Bahrain, renders Bahraini sovereignty nearly to the level of puppet state. However, its sovereignty is not non-existent, and it still has a role to play in the GCC. Without the GCC in the mix, Bahrain would have even less control over its foreign policy; it is therefore imperative to the government’s survival that it engages in cooperation.

4.3. National identity

In his book After Hegemony, Robert Keohane points out the failure of realist theory in its view on international cooperation in saying that it “fails to take into account that states’ conceptions of their interests, and of how their objectives should be pursued, depend not merely on national interests and the distribution of world power, but on the quantity, quality, and distribution of information” (Keohane 1984: 245). Keohane’s general neoliberal institutionalist approach stresses the importance of non-state actors and international institutions. The GCC is a testament to this notion. States remain units but sacrifice some sovereignty as units to achieve absolute gains through cooperation. Though more self-
sustaining than Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates utilised its GCC stature in its dispute with Iran over three islands in the Persian Gulf (Baghat 2011). Bahrain, though not central to Saudi Arabian economic interests, presents a consistent security threat.

The American role as the security guarantor of the Gulf States guarantees a sense of stability for the monarchies, but it has led to social backlash among the people of these states and given rhetorical advantage to Iran. Bahrain, for its part, has so far avoided major backlash from the US presence, possibly because of its many other internal problems. From a realist framework Walt (1987: 25-26) explains that “states that are viewed as aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them,” and that “intention, not power, is crucial.” This is precisely what led to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council: the perceived threat of a revolutionary Iran emboldening the Shiite minorities of the Gulf Arab States and destabilising their regimes. Bahrain’s proximity and vulnerability allowed it to act as a catalyst for other states to realise the potential benefits of sustained cooperation.

Western powers would normally be positive about democratic movements, but that operates under the assumption that the people would elect a government friendly to Western regimes. This is not always the case. As such, the United States and other allies of the GCC benefit more from keeping autocratic regimes in place than supporting democratic movements, at least in the GCC states. Indeed, the GCC states fundamentally disagree with the West on governance, believing democracy is not a universal value (Shlapentokh 2010). This dichotomy is something that the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia all face: national values versus national interests. The former contributes more to identity than it does intentions, while the latter contributes to intentions over identity (although these two concepts are not mutually exclusive). For example, the GCC intervention in Bahrain prompted Iran to declare it “unacceptable” and predict that it would only complicate matters; they also accused Saudi Arabia and Bahrain of killing Shiites (Khalaji 2011). But Iran could only watch from the sidelines and hope that the opposition movement would gain traction. Going too far to propagate its national values would be harmful to its national interests. Groups connected with the Iranian government organised two flotillas to Bahrain to support the Shiites, but both were forced to turn back under orders from Tehran (Khalaji 2011). Khalaji notes that Iran’s national interests were ultimately more imperative than its ideological ambitions, so its options in affecting change in Bahrain were limited. The structure, in this case, imposed limitations on Iran. But there are times where structural limitations have little effect; there comes a point in which a state, be it Saudi Arabia or Iran, cannot sacrifice its national values
to bolster national interests. Because these values define them, compromising them too much hurts national interests. For Saudi Arabia, having the military presence of the United States compromises the government’s claims of legitimacy and leadership of the Islamic world, at least in the eyes of the people.

4.4. Perception of the Iranian threat and the potential benefits to rapprochement

All of these theoretical variables have real-world consequences. Failure in securing Bahrain, for example, would be catastrophic for Saudi Arabia and its foothold on maintaining the status quo as it would destabilise the state and potentially energise the Eastern Province’s Shiite population into a revolt. But that is the extent to which it is willing to go; it otherwise avoids directly antagonising Iran because it would be equally as catastrophic for its stability. For Iran, meddling in Bahrain provides highly potential benefits with low comparable risks. Even more importantly, the mere perception that it may be involved in Bahraini instability contributes to its influence as it has a direct impact on Saudi policy; it could be that Iran benefits from defensive Saudi policy.

An absence of Iran as a major threat would alter Bahrain’s role in both the Middle Eastern and international structures. It would no longer have to worry about possible meddling, but it would also be unable to blame internal dissent on foreign interference. The government of Bahrain cited worries of an armed intervention by Iran as its primary reason for requesting GCC intervention despite the dearth of evidence (Bassiouni et al. 2011: 383-384). However, the Iranian government continued its reputation for harsh rhetoric when the Speaker of the National Consultative Council stated after the GCC intervention “the treason of the Saudi regime and its massacres against the Muslim people of Bahrain will never be forgotten” (Bassiouni et al. 2011: 385). Iran may be a legitimate threat to Bahraini sovereignty today as it has been in the past, but when it comes to cultivating Bahrain’s international image, overstating the Iranian threat may be a convenient tactic. It paints Bahrain as a victim of international meddling, which is something that could easily be inferred given its majority Shiite population. Given the structure of the modern international system, an outside state challenging the legitimacy of another state’s government is now far less immediately threatening than a state’s own people claiming illegitimacy. Despite the independent commission’s conclusion to the contrary, King Hamad continued to accuse Iran of inciting the uprising, perhaps going off of the strong rhetoric. Structural realism cannot adequately
account for the important role Bahrain’s internal dynamics play on the overarching political structure; Bahrain’s internal politics define its intentions, perception, and behaviour as well as the behaviour of surrounding states. This is contrary to the neorealist approach which would assert state behaviour is influenced by structure from an international-level analysis. Bahrain’s history is just as relevant in determining its motivations and its future as any sort of blanket application of international theory.

This is perhaps best approached then from a social constructivist viewpoint. Wendt (1999: 163) discusses the debate surrounding the causes of the Bosnian Civil War, writing that some analysts explain the war in practical, economic terms rather than as being a product of Serbian ethnic hatred toward Croats and Muslims. He claims these analysts discount the role the collective Serb historical perception played in the conflict, with distinct memories of Serb victimisation at the hands of the Ottomans and then later Croatian fascists. He goes on to say that “once collective memories have been created it may be hard to shake their long-term effects, even if a majority of individuals have ‘forgotten’ them at any given moment” (Wendt 1999: 163). This applies to Bahrain; its history of Iranian meddling first under the Safavids, then the shah, and later the Islamic Republic contributes to a collective memory that affects the ruling family. Collective memory has a similar affect on the Saudi government, which is well aware of the potential catastrophic effects Iranian meddling could wreak on its state’s stability.

As a result of collective memory and perception, even the slightest semblance of an Iranian threat to stability is enough to affect the behaviour of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Ayatollah Khamanei was optimistic during the Arab Spring because he believed that democracy movements would be good for Iran as peoples elected fresh regimes friendly to Iran; Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Shiites of Iraq are examples of this (Kitfield 2011).

There are possible outcomes outside of Bahraini control that could benefit the state and secure its future. Aarts and Van Dujne (2009) discuss the potential for rapprochement between the US and Iran as well as the potential benefits. Over the past three decades the likelihood of rapprochement has been low, and it is largely influenced by perception (similar to the Sino-American rapprochement). It is certainly a viable option for both states as well as the GCC that would lead to absolute gains for Washington and Tehran. The US and Iran have mutual security concerns regarding rogue militant groups in the region, and would both
benefit from stable regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the people of Iran as well as its political hardliners are not opposed to and even support renewed diplomatic ties (Sahimi 2009). The election of Barack Obama appeared to be a good sign for those hoping for some sort of rapprochement, but Iran’s nuclear program, its penchant for hardliner rhetoric, its antagonising of Israel, its support for Hezbollah, its 2009 election protests, and the Arab Spring have all complicated matters. American rapprochement with Iran would diminish Saudi importance in US foreign policy, but it would not necessarily harm Saudi national security. Iran would potentially no longer be a major security threat and Saudi Arabia would then have more room to consolidate its influence among the Gulf monarchies free from the perception of Iranian meddling.

But Saudi actions indicate the perception that such a rapprochement would be detrimental for the GCC states on all fronts: security, power, and ideology. Indeed, this is a matter of relative gains coming into the mix. Its influence would significantly diminish. A lack of a powerful Iran would loosen Saudi hegemony over the other oil monarchies and perhaps change the dynamic entirely. The argument could be made that Saudi hegemony is made possible by the Iranian security threat, but Iran would continue to be a competitor for regional power without necessarily destabilising the region. Meanwhile Iran, at least under the Ahmadinejad administration, acts to antagonise the United States possibly on the base perception that this course of action gives it greater ideological stature despite the heavy risks that its behaviour incurs. It is both a pragmatic and ideological approach.

But what would rapprochement mean for Bahrain? It already counts on the United States and the Saudi monarchy for political and economic security. However, its close ties with Saudi Arabia and its wariness to the Iranian threat ensure that Bahrain would have no role in bringing about rapprochement. If Iran no longer presented a security threat to the Al Khalifa regime it would lose its primary excuse for state instability. However, this would also grant the regime more room to deal with its internal problems without having to worry about outside meddling. Rapprochement could potentially be beneficial for all parties involved but, as we have seen in other dynamic shifts, it would also have far-reaching consequences.
Conclusion

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is undeniably complex and massive in scope, and Bahrain has the misfortune of being caught in the middle of the struggle. It is a decades-old competition that has fluctuated greatly. Each state’s behavior is rooted in perception of both the international situation and its own status as a state. Saudi Arabia is largely reactionary and desperate to maintain the status quo. Bahrain’s government is dependent on Saudi Arabia for stability and shares a similar fear of Iran as an anti-status quo power. It is also dependent on the GCC as an institution. Iran’s ambitions are less clear, but it has been an anti-status quo power for decades, using pragmatic means to build a sphere of influence throughout the region. It relies heavily on harsh rhetoric to further cloud its intentions. The rivalry has elements that can be explained through structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism, despite these theories often being contradictory. Multiple approaches offer valuable insight into the dynamic and, rather than dismissing them as entirely incompatible, elements of each approach should be used. One cannot simply categorise the rivalry solely as a balance of power scenario with only one such approach.

The balance of power approach is only a partially adequate summation of the modern dynamic. Indeed, the absence of a powerful Iraq has created the basis of uncertainty in the rivalry since 2003. Iraq has become another proxy front in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. However, there are still many other factors at play, and one should be careful not to disregard or underestimate these issues. Sectarianism and ideology are concurrent with the balance of power dynamic between the states rather than tertiary concerns. They affect the motivations and actions of each state in unique ways and contribute to domestic structures that influence state behaviour; this is not something that can be easily discounted. Each has come to define themselves as leaders of the Islamic world responsible for their respective co-religionists in neighbouring countries, including those who fall under the wider Shiite or Sunni umbrella who do not necessarily identify with Iran’s or Saudi Arabia’s specific brands of Islam, Twelver Shiism and Wahhabism respectively.

Both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain utilise the GCC to bolster state stability, seek absolute gains for member states, and maintain the status quo. The common forum gives smaller Gulf States, particularly Bahrain, leverage on the international scene often disproportionate to their own power. Oftentimes the strict preservation of the status quo presents obstacles to the Iranian sphere of influence and represents the dichotomy between the desires of ruling
governments and the people. The United States’s active role in the region causes tension among states as well as between governments and citizens.

It can be inferred that Iran has grown into more of a pragmatic power than an ideological one. Iran’s antagonising of the US and Saudi Arabia is calculated to benefit Iran’s stature. Bahrain represents perhaps the most tangible power struggle in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, even if its internal structure is more responsible for its problems than the rivalry itself. Rapprochement between the US and Iran could offer absolute gains and is a viable option, but it would inevitably lead to unforeseeable consequences that so often entail complex international situations. One must consider all of the elements in the mix when analyzing the rivalry and its future.

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