

# The Alliance dilemma of the Gulf States after the Obama presidency

*Máté Szalai*<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The article aims at explaining the alliance choices of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council after the Obama Presidency from a theoretical point of view. During the last eight years, Saudi Arabia and its neighbours felt neglected by Washington and considered the US commitment to guarantee their security to be weakened. Using a modified version of a “balance of interests” model, the study presents four possible scenarios available to Gulf states in the post-Obama era and analyses them through the lenses of probability and durability. Saudi Arabia has already stepped up and become more pro-active in recent years, but the economic sustainability of its current foreign policy is highly questionable. While in the short term it is likely that US foreign policy will accept the Gulf countries’ strategic considerations under the Trump presidency, the presence of Washington will probably decrease over time. That is why, in the long term, the GCC has to either find a new protector or redefine its role in the regional *status quo*.

**Keywords:** Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, alliances, United States, balance of interests

By the end of the Obama presidency, Gulf–US relations came under severe pressure. Washington’s foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was ambivalent and inconsistent in many respects, often to the point that it was unpredictable or even harmful for the United States’ traditional allies (Walt, 2016). This notion is especially true for the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, with special regard to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). They were angered by Washington’s stance on many issues of great importance, including its belated response

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<sup>1</sup> Máté Szalai is an assistant lecturer and a PhD candidate at the Corvinus University of Budapest and a researcher at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade analysing mainly Gulf politics, Middle Eastern relations and small state foreign policy.

to the Egyptian revolution, the lack of will to intervene in the Syrian conflict against the Assad regime, and the negligence of the security concerns of the Gulf states regarding the Iranian nuclear deal. Tensions manifested on the rhetorical level too, as President Obama called the Gulf countries “free riders”, whilst Prince Turki al-Faisal criticised the American leader in a similarly harsh manner (Al-Faisal, 2016; Gause, 2016: 114-115).

Following these apparent tensions, many questioned the durability of US-GCC strategic cooperation. Firstly, in the context of Washington’s “pivot to Asia” policy, the importance of the MENA region (and thus the value of the GCC in US foreign relations) is expected to diminish. Secondly – and partly as a consequence of this – a distance grew between the strategic priorities of the two states (Gause, 2016: 117). Thirdly, as some argue, given that the United States is moving closer to self-sufficiency in the energy market, the importance of hydrocarbon reserves in the Persian Gulf is now less of an incentive for Washington to keep protecting its allies in the Peninsula (Glaser – Kelanic, 2016). These developments can push the GCC towards other players, such as the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) or the EU, both in the economic and political dimensions (Kausch, 2014: 4-7)

On the basis of this assessment, the principal aim of the present article is to describe and interpret the implications of the alliance dilemma of the Gulf states in the wake of the Obama era from a theoretical point of view. The methodological framework of the study (presented in the first part) will be based on a modified version of the dominantly neorealist “balance of interest” model (originally developed by Randall Schweller in 1987), adapted to the current constellation by the introduction of constructivist elements. Based on this, the article provides an overview of the main options available to the Gulf states, and elaborates on their relative probability and their foreseeable consequences.

### **The modification of the balance of interest model**

The traditional way in which scholars of international relations describe<sup>2</sup> alliance-making is formed in the context of balance of power theory. Stephen M. Walt (1987:17-21) refers, as the two main “hypotheses” of the (neorealist) literature, to balancing (when “states form alliances in order to prevent stronger powers from dominating them”) and bandwagoning (“alignment with the source of danger”, i.e. a stronger actor). His theory

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<sup>2</sup> The article does not seek to provide an in-depth and detailed analysis of the literature on alliance-making, it just refers to the basic ideas which are essential for the topic of the study.

predicts that “the weaker the state, the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance”, due to the simple fact that it cannot change the balance of power by its alignment to either side (Wolfers, 1960: 180). Faced with external threats, such entities do not have the luxury of choice: in order to survive, they are naturally attracted to greater powers.

Therefore alliance-making is critical for weak states when they face an imminent threat. In Alastair Smith’s (1995) game-theory model of alliance-making decisions, “Nation B” wants to build a close retaliation with “Nation C” if it has an international policy dispute with “Nation A” which can result in a war. “A reliable alliance deters A from attacking” (Ibid: 412), since the alliance between “B” and “C” lowers the chances of the acquiescence of “B” in the policy dispute, and also because war is less likely to be cheap or winnable for “A”. Nonetheless, this mechanism works only if (1) initially, the perceived power of “B” is lower than that of “A” and (2) the sum of the perceived power of “B” and “C” is greater than that of “A.”

Another basic notion of the alliance-making literature is the differentiation of “status quo” and “revisionist powers.” The former ones are “those states which seek to preserve the established order, or which have renounced the use of force as a method of changing that order,” whereas the latter ones are “bent on changing the status quo, if necessary by force” (Wolfers, 1960:181). It is self-explanatory to assume that states which defy the regional or world order are more likely to make alliances to defeat the powers maintaining that order, even if there is no direct overlap between their material interests.

Randall Schweller (1987) criticised neorealism and the usage of balance of power theory in alliance making. He argued that this school of thought underestimates “the extent of bandwagoning behaviour” (Ibid: 99), and therefore introduced the concept of the “balance of interests” (Ibid: 99-106). Although he built on the already used notions of alliance-making theory (especially those of status quo powers and revisionists), the key question in his model is the cost one is willing to pay to either change or defend the international order. Schweller conceptualised “state interest” as the difference between the “value of revision” and the “value of status quo.” To predict behaviour or alliance policy, it is not sufficient to calculate whether this difference is negative (in case of status quo powers) or positive (in case of revisionists) – one has to see the *extent* to which a given state may be interested in the preservation of the existing order or change.

On the basis of these assumptions, Schweller differentiated four “roles” states may take in the international system. It may be argued that these positions also hold implications for alliance preferences:

- *lions*: states with the most negative score, which are highly interested in maintaining the status quo. They want to make alliances with other lions or lambs (when the latter have something to offer for the pro-status quo camp);<sup>3</sup>
- *lambs*: states with typically limited capacities, which are interested in the status quo but are unable/unwilling to pay high costs to preserve it.<sup>4</sup> By default, they seek alliances with states which are inclined to pay more than them;
- *jackals*: states which want more than what they possess and are willing to pay to achieve change in the status quo, but only to a limited extent. Like lambs, they are more likely to be smaller states and prefer alliances with wolves;
- *wolves*: states with the most incentive to aggressively change the system. These revisionist powers question the leadership of lions and try to take over their role.

In *Figure 1*, we summarized the main elements of the model with a special emphasis on state interest (status quo-activism/revisionism), determination (the amount of costs they are willing to pay) and the most likely alliance-making preferences.

**Figure 1: The four roles and implied alliance behaviour**

| <b>Role</b>           | <b>Lions</b> | <b>Lambs</b> | <b>Jackals</b> | <b>Wolves</b> |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| <b>State interest</b> | Status quo   | Status quo   | Revisionist    | Revisionist   |
| <b>Determination</b>  | High         | Low          | Low            | High          |
| <b>Preferred ally</b> | Lion         | Lion         | Wolf           | Wolf          |

In the following pages, Schweller’s model will be applied to describe the alliance options of the GCC states in the post-Obama era, with two modifications. First of all, similarly to Alastair Smith’s approach, one has to incorporate the effects of perceptions

<sup>3</sup> On the subject of what “lambs” may offer for alliances and coalitions see Marton (2017).

<sup>4</sup> In this contextualization, free-riders are examples of extreme lamb states.

in the investigation. Given the fact that costs (and the willingness to pay for these costs) play an important role in alliance-making, it is self-explanatory that the participants of cooperation would like the other(s) to pay as much as possible (especially in the case of lion–lamb and wolf–jackal relations). Nonetheless, we cannot presume perfect knowledge or complete information in interstate relations, therefore it will be the perceptions, as to what a given party is inclined to pay, that will shape alliance formation.

From this follows that one needs to apply the model only from the perspective of a specific actor. The evaluation of the status quo by different states – both friends and foes – can be and surely is formed in different social context, therefore there won't necessarily be two states which sees the regional balance of power (or the role of different actors) in the same way.

Secondly, the model may be adapted to the peculiar systemic attributes of the MENA region. Due to the decreasing importance of systemic conflicts which structure international relations in the region (such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or the Iraqi–Iranian rivalry), Kristina Kausch (2014) describes the current state of affairs as “competitive multipolarity,” which effects alliance-making to a great extent. According to her (Ibid: 11),

“rather than forming cohesive blocs and entering long-term alignments, a range of regional and external players of different sizes and weights are likely to compete in shifting, overlapping alliances. Past strategic orientations can no longer be taken for granted. In a region marked by growing insecurity and competitive multipolarity, alliances are likely to take more passing, functional forms.”

Besides the questionable stability of long-term alliances, competitive multipolarity has two main effects on interstate relations. Firstly, it is not just the durability of relations which comes under pressure, but also their multi-sectoral nature. Even if two states form an alliance in a specific policy question, it is highly unlikely that they have the same opinion in other areas. This leads to *incoherent relations*, namely a situation in which two actors cooperate on one issue even as they do not collaborate or perhaps compete on another. The perfect example could be relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar: they have cooperated to some extent in questions such as the Syrian civil war, the Bahraini intervention, or oil price policy, while *at the same time* they fought a quasi-proxy war in Egypt between the “revolutions” of 2011 and 2013. Consequently,

it is hardly impractical to investigate the “status quo” and the dynamics of interstate relations in general. One has to focus on a limited set of policy areas.

In this framework, states which can communicate with all other actors have more leverage, even if they are relatively small states. As Kausch states:

“There has emerged a new layer of ambitious small and midsize powers, each of which has sought to carve out an independent foreign policy profile and clout. These swing states – including widely diverse powers with often clashing interests, such as Qatar, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Egypt – can tilt the balance of power in the Middle East” (Kausch, 2016).

These swing states can be quite flexible regarding their interests and can maintain ties with pro-status quo players and revisionists at the same time. Thus they constitute a different, fifth role in the adapted model presented here.

### **Alliance options of the GCC states**

The modified version of the balance of interests model helps us understand the dilemmas in GCC-US relations. Forming alliances with external powers has always played an important role in tribal rivalries and (later on) in regime survival in the Gulf region (Davidson, 2011: 1-2), since these external actors were usually stronger than local actors (Commins, 2014: 1). The KSA and its small neighbours needed protection from both Iran and Iraq, both of which represented a political threat (that of Shia Islamism and Pan-Arabism) as well as a military threat, simultaneously. Without the US security umbrella, the monarchies would not have been able to protect themselves (Kostiner, 1998). Although the alliance with the US (which has been built up gradually)<sup>5</sup> does not go without unfavourable consequences for the regimes in question (Lawson, 2011: 56-68), it has been essential in the survival of these states.

In this framework, we can conceptualise the behaviour of the GCC states as playing the role of lambs, while the United States is taking the role of a lion that, when necessary, intervenes to deter or defeat a prospective or actual aggressor. Since 1979, and especially since 2003, Iran is viewed to be the wolf that aims at remaking the regional power constellation and enlarge its sphere of influence considerably. During the last years,

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<sup>5</sup> Until the 1960s, Great Britain was the main dominant external power in the Peninsula, but it decided to withdraw. The American commitment to and presence in the Gulf started to strengthen afterwards, first after 1979 (due to the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) and then in the 1990s as a consequence of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti war.

Tehran gained leverage in the civil wars of the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and, in the Saudi narrative, in Yemen (Henderson, 2016). Therefore, so goes the by now commonplace argument (e.g. Judis, 2017), the Obama administration did not do enough to tackle the Iranian threat: it did not intervene firmly in the Syrian civil war against Bassar al-Assad, and it failed to provide decisive assistance to Saudi Arabia's anti-Houthi campaign in Yemen, even as it offered Iran a way out of the sanctions regime with the nuclear deal (Goldenberg – Dalton, 2015). These developments questioned the perception of the US as a lion in the anti-Iranian “alliance,” putting pressure on the GCC to redefine their role in this constellation accordingly. In the meantime, the critique coming from the Obama administration regarding the role of the GCC can also be translated as a debate on the cost-sharing inside the alliance; at least the language used by Washington (“free-riders”, “Saudi Arabia was not doing enough”; see Nazer, 2016) implies so.

In the following pages, four possible scenarios are presented from the perspective of the GCC which *ceteris paribus* have the potential to provide the necessary level of security and stability for them in the region.

*Option 1: The re-emergence of the United States as a lion*

The most optimistic scenario for the GCC is for Washington to retake its position as a meaningful ally that is willing to pay a lion's share of the price of defence. In this case, the problems detected in bilateral relations may be re-interpreted as but temporary symptoms of failure (of Obama's policy in the Middle East). This scenario may provide a high level of security with low costs to the GCC members.

There are already some indications that the Trump presidency will seek to emerge once again as a lion in the Gulf. King Salman was one of the first Middle Eastern heads of state with whom the new president held a phone conversation, discussing the establishment of “safe zones” in Syria and Yemen, the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, and cooperation on Iran (Reuters, 2017). Public commentators in the Gulf also support Trump's stance on Middle Eastern issues and they already see the new President as a much stronger ally than the Obama administration was (Business Insider, 2017). Reports indicate that Yemeni theatre could be the first scene for the fiercer anti-Iranian and pro-Saudi American stance in the region (De Luce – McLeary, 2017).

Although the first weeks of the Trump presidency indicate a high degree of probability for this scenario, it is questionable whether the lion role is sustainable for the

United States in the long run. First of all, the Middle East is widely anticipated to be losing its priority from the perspective of Washington in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2010 national security strategy of the United States, which amounted to a doctrinal manifestation of Obama's "pivot to Asia" policy, was considered to be a reaction to the "changing global strategic environment" (Balogh, 2012). The American presence in the MENA region, according to some experts, became too costly and pointless, a result of "imperial overstretch" (Simon – Stevenson, 2015). The main national interests of the United States rest in Pacific Asia, not in the Middle East.

The importance of the Persian Gulf may be slowly depreciating in Washington. As Charles Glaser and Rosemary Kelanic (2016) pointed out recently, the incentive to maintain a huge American presence in this region used to be key both to security and prosperity, but it may be timely to re-evaluate the validity of this assumption. This "raises the threshold for military involvement" (Ibid: 123), lowering the costs the US may be willing to fulfil its commitments in the region. Moreover, argue Glaser and Kelanic, there are in fact other, less costly ways for Washington to pursue its regional interests than military presence (some of these directly contradict Saudi strategic calculations, e.g. the creation of an inclusive regional security architecture).

All in all, the majority of scholars agree that the American presence in the Middle East and the Gulf is likely to decrease in the coming decades. While the interests of the US are unlikely to change to a great extent, the price Washington is willing to pay for them will decrease. Therefore, on the basis of the first few weeks of the Trump presidency, one can come to the conclusion that a scenario featuring increasing US commitment has a high probability in the short run, but is unlikely to be sustained in the long run.

#### *Option 2: Finding a new lion*

Due to the systematic pressure on Washington to pivot to Asia described in the previous section, it is a very realistic scenario that the Gulf countries may have to accommodate to the diminishing interest of the United States in the MENA region. In this case, the United States would perpetually and meaningfully transform into a lamb from a lion, thus the Gulf countries would have to find other options. One such option is that they may seek to find a new "lion".

In the past years, many analysts pointed to indications that the GCC is searching for new allies. Possible partners could be those states which share in the interests of the



Gulf countries and may at the same time be disinterested in the possible shift of the US stance in the region: most notably Israel. Numerous reports (Guzansky – Neubauer, 2014; Henderson, 2015; Ramani, 2015; Cafiero – Wagner, 2016; Shezaf 2016) have surfaced in the last years describing a realisation of common interests (or rather the overlap of interests) between the Gulf countries and Israel, which drove leaders to cooperate with each other without the formal establishment of diplomatic ties. The question of Iran and the disappointment in Washington could be the biggest incentives for the two sides to cooperate.

Turkey could be another candidate for becoming the ally of the GCC in security affairs. Ankara has its own challenge of foreign policy orientation and a deep frustration vis-à-vis American and European allies. Their interests are somewhat colliding when it comes to Iran (Al Arabiya, 2016) or economic ties (Ashraq Al-Awsat, 2016). Nonetheless, closer cooperation with Turkey would raise many questions: Ankara has favoured Qatar in the past couple of years instead of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia (most notably in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood), and this is still a sensitive question in some circles.

The GCC can also look for a protector outside of the region. First and foremost, the European Union is the most important economic partner of the Gulf countries, with rapidly growing ties between the two sides. However, the lack of effective capabilities, the slowness of decision-making, the lack of interests, and the somewhat politicised nature of Gulf investments in Europe makes the EU a partner of questionable reliability. The United Kingdom has nevertheless begun to develop its presence in the Gulf: the first British naval base in Manama, Bahrain has recently opened, after the absence of a permanent British naval presence for decades (Telegraph, 2016). Prime Minister Theresa May expressed the country's willingness to strengthen cooperation with the GCC (Al Jazeera, 2016). This process can even be exacerbated by the Brexit – London promised a quick start of negotiations for a free trade agreement between the UK and the GCC (The National, 2016), a question which has been stuck between the EU and the GCC for decades.

Besides the United Kingdom, other actors seem only theoretical possibilities. Russia is building up its presence in the MENA region, although its activities in Syria and its support provided for Iran are currently harmful for the GCC's interests. Until this changes, Moscow can only be a priority partner in economic terms (Dutkiewicz, 2016). Relations cannot be strategic, only incoherent.

China and India both have their ties in the Gulf region (especially in the fields of energy and the labour market), but neither of the two have a viable regional strategy or presence, therefore the GCC cannot rely on them in the foreseeable future in security matters.

All in all, Israel, Turkey and the United Kingdom may play a growing role vis-à-vis the GCC, should the US shift towards the role of a lamb rather. Interests are clearly overlapping in the case of Israel, while alliance with Turkey or the UK would necessitate further steps to align strategic considerations: both actors have interests in including Iran in the regional and the global system. Nonetheless, economic incentives and historical ties can provide a basis for closer cooperation.

### *Option 3: Becoming the lion*

On the basis of our model, it is also an option for lambs to become lions if they choose to pay more to reach the common goals of their alliance, to preserve the status quo. The decreasing determination of the US did just that in the case of Saudi foreign policy: since the emergence of the new establishment and King Salman in 2015, Riyadh has demonstrably intensified its presence across the region. As Frederic Wehrey argues:

“A standard interpretation holds that this adventurism stems from Riyadh’s frustration with what Saudis see as the United States’ retreat from the Middle East and especially its tacit complicity in Iran’s aggressive behaviour after the nuclear accord” (Bahout et al, 2016).

In line with this, Ray Takeyh and Hasib Sabbagh (2015) conclude,

“After centuries of relying on external empires – first British and then American – to safeguard its territory and protect its regional interests, the House of Saud is beginning to rely on its own resources.”

Apart from the Yemeni intervention, we can see evidence of this behaviour in the Sunni Arab anti-terrorist cooperation organised by Saudi Arabia, or the exacerbated usage of the League of Arab Nations to forge regional unity against Iran and to establish Gulf leadership in the Middle East (Hannah, 2016).

Nonetheless, many experts question the ability of the GCC to uphold this status. The smaller members are too weak in absolute terms, while Saudi Arabia cannot afford to pay the huge costs deriving from the lion’s role. Since the fall in oil prices beginning in 2014, the budgets of oil-exporting countries came under severe pressure (Hannah,

2015). Due to the decrease of income and the increase in expenditures (due to the Yemeni war), the Saudi budget deficit rose to 15% of the GDP in 2015 (Nasser, 2016). The transition to the post-oil era has already started in the Gulf, and this transition will put much burden on these economies (Al-Khatteeb, 2015), even without the expensive defence of the regional status quo. Therefore, while in the short term this scenario has been and will be probably tempting for Saudi Arabia, it may be unsustainable in the long run.

*Option 4: Repositioning as swing states*

Without the ability to maintain the status quo by themselves or to find a new lion who is willing to pay for this, the Gulf states may also reposition themselves to become *swing states*. As it was already described, the concept refers to those actors which can maintain relations with many players and put more emphasis on case-by-case cooperation than on long-term alliances. Given the lack of a reliable, dominant partner, GCC members may act alone and, by redefining their interests, they may build bridges between different actors in the Middle East.

The role of the swing state is, however, only available for smaller states in the GCC. Firstly, this strategy requires flexibility, rapid decision-making, and domestic stability, none of which can be attributed to Saudi Arabia at the moment. Secondly, swing states can only operate in a somewhat balanced regional landscape – all major pro-status quo players cannot turn into swing states, because then the balance of power would inevitably shift in favour of the revisionists.

Nonetheless, since Saudi Arabia refuses to redefine its interests, smaller GCC members may play the role of swing states. Qatar and Oman (Kausch, 2016; Neubauer, 2016) are experienced in this kind of foreign policy strategy: both have defied the Saudi strategic considerations in recent years, especially in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood and in the case of Iranian relations. Apart from Doha and Muscat, Kuwait also tries to express a stance different from Saudi Arabia's, and tries to reintroduce the Islamic Republic in regional politics (Tasnim, 2017). This position can be seen by Riyadh as "revisionist" since it would accept some sort of Iranian influence in the region. In the perspective of the lesser powers, however, such changes may bring more stability in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Based on the modified model of the balance of interests, four scenarios were presented in this article as to the GCC states' basic alliance options. For them, the cheapest and most advantageous of these would be if the United States would be willing to re-emerge as a lion: as a fierce protector of the status quo (1). Lacking that, the GCC states can either try to find a new defender (2), or reposition themselves as the lion (3), or as a swing state (4).

The two most important dimension in which we have to analyse the plausibility of these possibilities is that of time, along with the differences among the GCC members. First of all, Options 1 and 3 are only available in the short or middle term – due to systematic changes as well as domestic political and economic reasons, neither the United States nor the GCC can afford to pay too much to preserve the status quo for decades. For this reason, Options 2 and 4 are more likely in the middle and especially the longer term.

Secondly, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states are in a different position. While the smaller monarchies may be suitable to become swing states, the same cannot be said of Saudi foreign policy.

With a view to this, the most probable scenario for the future is that in the short term, Saudi Arabia will strengthen its lion role to the extent to which its economic resources and its capabilities allow it, while also trying to persuade the Trump presidency to re-take its role as the ultimate protector of the status quo. In this case, smaller Gulf states – especially Qatar and Oman – could remain swing states. At the same time, Riyadh and its neighbours need to prepare for the post-oil/post-Trump era as well, and should accordingly seek to create a more stable and durable alliance system. They can do this in two ways: either by making alliances with new players, or by redefining their interests and the status quo.

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