

# Kuwait's Hedging Strategy Toward Iran and Saudi Arabia

by **Mohammed Torki Bani Salameh**

This study aims to reveal the impact of Saudi–Iranian competition on the countries' relationship with the State of Kuwait. The study showed that the events, crises, and conflicts in the region from 1971 to 2023 formed a field of competition between the two countries for hegemony and influence over the countries of the region.

In its hegemony strategy, Iran has relied on penetrating fragile and weak countries politically, economically, and militarily, in addition to supporting Shiite minorities in Arabian Gulf



*Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (right) meets with the late Emir of Kuwaiti Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in 2014.*

countries. This has created conflict with Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the region, and Saudi Arabia has tried to lead a unified Arab and Islamic alliance against Iran. Over time, the dispute between them has turned into an ideological, religious, political, and military battle. As for this competition over their relations with the State of Kuwait, the Kuwaiti strategy has been based on sheltering from the conflicts of the major powers in the region and looking for an influential regional role to relieve the pressures of those countries and limit their expansionist attempts. But the geographical dilemma of Kuwait has made it adopt foreign policies that tend to be cautious, and Kuwait has sought to pursue a hedging policy toward Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Kuwaiti diplomacy is always keen to activate cooperation and support rapprochement with Saudi Arabia at all levels, it is trying to hold the stick from the middle in its relations with Iran between the hardening of collective Gulf decisions and flexibility in bilateral relations.

## Introduction

Political theory finds that states resort to multiple security strategies to pursue their national interests and to implement the objectives of their foreign policies. Some of

these are cooperative, some are conflictual, some employ neutrality. Some depend on balancing, which can be hard and soft. Some are based on an alliance with great powers or rising powers, which is known as bandwagoning.<sup>1</sup>

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Practice shows that yet another option exists, beyond those noted above, and one that has not received adequate attention in academic studies: strategic hedging, or a compromise between conflictual and cooperative mechanisms. A small state can hedge when it seeks middle ground. Some call that a smart way to compensate for smallness.<sup>2</sup>

Hedging offsets potential losses or gains. It permits small states to prepare for confrontation, uncertainty, and risk by protecting their security position in case their relationship with the leader of the unipolar system worsens. It is a useful strategy for states that are unable to settle on other strategies such as balancing, or bandwagoning.<sup>3</sup>

In the Arabian Gulf region, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman deal with Iran via strategic hedging. Since their security environment is characterized by dynamism and uncertainty, it is perfect for strategic hedging, which enables them to maintain different strategic options and provides an ability to maneuver. As Yoel Guzansky points out, strategic hedging reduces the danger of conflict with

Iran in the short term while preserving contingency plans in the long term.

Arabian Gulf states seek to cooperate with Iran while preserving the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) framework, one established shortly after the Iranian revolution largely due to the threat coming from Tehran. Differing threat perceptions within the GCC made it difficult to establish a joint institutionalized security strategy and cracks in their unity weaken their ability to act in unison vis-à-vis Iran. Even when perceptions of the Iranian threat—the military buildup, nuclear ambitions, political subversion, terrorism—are similar, each state chooses to hedge.<sup>4</sup>



*A demonstration in Tahrir Square in Egypt on July 29, 2011.*

Following the Arab Spring revolutions, the Arabian Gulf states had to adapt to the new political conjuncture in the region. These policy revisions were also responding to the

<sup>1</sup> Ionut C. Popescu, "Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy in the Conduct of Foreign Policy, *Journal of Strategic Studies*", Vol. 41, No. 3, 2018, pp. 438-448.

<sup>2</sup> H. Mehmetcik, "If you are not big enough, pick a strategy: Bandwagoning, Balancing, Hedging." *International Association for Political Science Students*, April 4, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Telci, İ. N. & Rakipoglu, M. (2021). *Hedging as a Survival Strategy for Small States: The Case of Kuwait*. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, Vol. 10, Issue 2, pp. 213-229.

<sup>4</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign? Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring 2015).

changing policies of great powers like the United States. As I written before, the perception of a US pullback from its commitments in the Middle East, small states of the Arabian Gulf must develop a new vision of how to protect themselves. The Arabian Gulf States, which relied on the US for decades, to strengthen and maintain their internal security began to lose their confidence in the US.<sup>5</sup>

The Arab Gulf region has attracted the interests of researchers and specialists in international relations due to its geopolitical importance, as it is a link between East and West and contains the most important international straits, the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, Bab al-Mandab, and the Red Sea. The Strait of Hormuz controls the trade routes to and from the Gulf, which means that controlling it means controlling navigation in the Gulf, and hence oil supplies, the backbone of development in the developed countries.

Saudi–Iranian relations are based on competition to control the countries of the region, and this competition has passed through several stages, the first of which was the public confrontation in the 1980s, followed by a short-term expansion in the 1990s, then a struggle for influence in the Middle East. This has been reflected in the countries of the region, including the State of Kuwait, which since 2011 has witnessed many transformations and strategic changes

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that have made its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran characterized by actions, reactions, and attraction. Therefore, this article will discuss the Saudi–Iranian rivalry and its impact on relations with Kuwait.

This paper contends that Kuwait uses a hedging strategy to minimize the risks and uncertainties left by US policy of repositioning in the Middle East. Kuwait uses hedging to prevent Iran and Saudi Arabia from dominating the regional order.

### **Competition for Leadership by the Regional Forces in the Region and Geopolitical Competition**

After the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the formation of the wilayat-e faqih system centered around the religious rule of the Iranian leader,<sup>6</sup> Iran adopted the slogans of the global Islamic state, exporting the revolution, and protecting the weak on Earth.<sup>7</sup> With a commitment to employ all its capabilities to achieve this,<sup>8</sup> the Iranian project to penetrate the countries of the region depends on the formation of political groups and entities that it associates with, and then creating a state of instability in the countries of the region to become politically

<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Tork Bani Salameh. *Bahrain's Vision in the Gulf's Security Order*. Middle East Policy. Vol.30., No.1 (Spring 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Al-Salami, "The Future of Saudi–Iranian Relations" (In Arabic), *Al-Faisal Magazine* 477–78 (Shawwal and Dhul-Qa'dah 1437 AH, 2016), p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Amjad Kishk, "Tensions in Iranian-Gulf Relations, Causes – Repercussions – Confrontation Mechanisms," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (February 2016), pp. 8–9.

<sup>8</sup> Massad Nevin, *Decision-Making in Iran and Arab-Iranian Relations* (In Arabic) (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2, 2002), p. 211.

and militarily failed states.<sup>9</sup> The Arab revolutions and crises in the region from 2003 to 2011 led to the weakening of the central authority of the state in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In such countries, Iran enjoys a huge presence of sympathizers, supporters, and even fighters, who are wholeheartedly devoted to the Iranian project of expansionism in the Middle East, which gave Iran the opportunity to implement its hegemony over those countries via sub-state actors (Shiite minorities in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait) and political entities loyal to Iran (Lebanese Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Houthis in Yemen, military intervention in Syria). Iran appeared euphoric over the disintegration of the pro-Western Arab order and saw an "Islamic awakening" on the move with a broader role for its Shiite network. In view of this, Saudi Arabia attempted to lead a unified Arab and Islamic alliance against Iran and tried to support those countries and strengthen their military authorities to be able to restrict the presence of groups and non-state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias backed by Iran.<sup>10, 11</sup>

### The Impact of Saudi–Iranian Rivalry on Kuwaiti–Iranian Relations

The State of Kuwait is a small country surrounded by three major countries in the region. It is located within the so-called pressure triangle between Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, which has always been a major concern in Kuwait's foreign policy. This is

because historical experience has shown that each of these major players in this regional system seeks to impose its influence and control over the rest of the parties, especially the small Gulf states, among which is Kuwait.<sup>12</sup>



A map of Kuwait showing its northern border with Iraq, Saudi Arabia to the south, and a maritime border with Iran.

The Kuwaiti strategy has been based on sheltering from the conflicts of these major powers in the region, seeking primarily to preserve its existence. Therefore, Kuwait has been keen to seek for itself an influential regional role that will relieve it of the pressures of the “pressure triangle” and limit the expansionist attempts of any of its parties.

<sup>9</sup> Fathi Boularas, “Iranian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Between Doctrinal Considerations and Geopolitical Factors” (In Arabic), *Humanitarianism* (Mohamed Khider University, Algeria), Vol. 16, No. 2 (2016), pp. 275–78.

<sup>10</sup> Azhar al-Rubaie, *Protest in Iraq: Against Domestic Corruption and Iranian Influence*, The Washington Institute, Oct. 29, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Bassiouni Abdel Halim, *The Foreign Policy Orientations of Small Countries towards the Regional Neighborhood: A Case Study of Jordan, Strategic Brochures* (In Arabic) (Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, No. 327, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Faisal Abu Salib, “Kuwaiti Mediation: Historical Experiences in Facing a Unique Crisis” (In Arabic), Al Jazeera Center for Studies, June 22, 2017.

In the face of this geographical dilemma, the State of Kuwait has tried to adopt inexpensive foreign policies that tend to be cautious and avoid provoking crises with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In implementing its foreign policy, it has largely relied on multilateral diplomatic tools, international conferences, and regional organizations, as well as economic relations, so its external decisions are more related to maximizing economic gains and benefits.<sup>13</sup>

Historically, bilateral relations between Iran and Kuwait have been affected by Iran's external behavior, which since the Iranian revolution in 1979 has depended on interfering in the internal affairs of neighboring countries by adopting, under the ideology of 'Vilayat al Faqih', (Rule of the Jurisprudent) the principle of exporting the revolution, reviving the role of Shiites in the region (strengthening Shiites in Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain), and playing a role on the regional and international stages. Kuwait's indigenous Shiite communities responded to the Iranian revolution of 1979 by organizing a series of mass meetings and demonstrations. The authorities countered by deporting a prominent Shia cleric with close ties to Iran and expelling a large number of politically suspect expatriates. In the early 1980s, Shiite militants launched a wave of bombings and hijackings in an attempt to undermine the authority of the Al-Sabah. The ruling family turned to nationalists and Bedouins as a way of rallying support for the political system among Kuwaiti citizens.<sup>14</sup> There has come to be a mutually beneficial relationship between the rise of Iran's political position and the roles of its allies in the Middle East, which

has strengthened the position of Shiite identity in the regional and international political arena.<sup>15</sup> This has been accomplished through a number of different means and methods, including the recruitment of agents in these countries, in addition to carrying out operations of violence and terrorism in order to destabilize internal stability and influence the positions of Kuwait.



*Protests in Bahrain in February 2011.*

During the period from 1983 to 1987, seven Iranian terrorist operations were launched against the State of Kuwait. The most dangerous of these was in 1985, when Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, was subjected to an assassination attempt. The rate of terrorist operations increased during the period of tense Iranian–Kuwaiti relations due to Kuwait's support of Iraq in its war against Iran, which coincided with the height of the internal Iranian effort to export the revolution to neighboring countries and its adoption of the principle of intervention as a basic orientation of Iranian

<sup>13</sup> Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge, U.K. 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Suad Bardi Al-Saeedi, "Kuwaiti Foreign Policy from Political Survival to Renewal," *Journal of Financial and Commercial Research*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 2021), p. 432.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Jawad Larjani, *Statements in the National Strategy "Explanation of the Shiite Umm Al-Qura Theory,"* Nabil Ali Al-Atoum (London: Al-Asr Center for Strategic and Future Studies, 2013), pp. 108–109.

foreign policy. Some terrorist operations have also targeted Saudi interests in Kuwait, reflecting the tense relationship and hostility that Iran has toward Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Arab Gulf states. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and Iran's support for Kuwait, relations between the two countries improved, and Iranian-backed terrorist operations disappeared during the period 1990-2011. But after 2011, Iranian interference in Kuwaiti internal affairs began to return to the fore once again. Iran began planting agents, recruiting spies, supporting, and infiltrating Shia in Kuwait, seeking to gain their loyalty, and supporting the internal movement against the political system. In 2011, the Kuwaiti security forces discovered a spy network providing intelligence to Iran, which strained relations between the two countries, especially since the discovery of this cell was linked to the movement that Kuwait witnessed within the wave of protests that swept the countries of the Arab world. Investigations revealed that this cell was directly linked to Iran, specifically to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Death sentences were issued to the members of this network, three Iranian diplomats were expelled, and the Kuwaiti ambassador to Iran was summoned for consultations.<sup>16</sup>

In 2012, the dispute over the continental shelf area on the maritime borders between the two countries returned, involving the "Al-Durra field" (Iran calls it the Arash field), which is

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the water triangle located in the north of the Arabian Gulf. The bulk of it is located on the common border between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but part is located on the Iranian side,

which is estimated at only 5 percent of the total field.<sup>17</sup> The roots of the dispute go back to Iran granting the right of exploration and exploitation to British Petroleum, while Kuwait granted the concession to Royal Dutch Shell, and the two concessions intersected in part of the field. Kuwait protested Iran's search for gas in the field, in which no agreement was reached regarding the demarcation of the borders, summoned the chargé d'affaires of the Iranian embassy in Kuwait and handed him a protest note. Although this dispute relates to a sovereign right, it did not lead to a direct clash or military intervention. Rather, the two countries have space for diplomatic movement to avoid the impact of this file on the course of relations in a way that amounts to confrontation or estrangement.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2019, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to work together to develop and exploit the Al-Durra field. The Iranian foreign ministry expressed its denunciation and opposition to this step, which it described as illegal, given that Iran shares this field with the two parties, and stressed that "there are parts of it within the unspecified waters

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Hafeez Mahboub, *The Solid Refuge: Saudi Arabia in the Face of Iranian Impulses* (London: Dar any Books, 2017), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Issam Abdel Shafi, "[The Kuwaiti-Iranian Continental Shelf: Political Dimensions Driven by Economic Interests](#)" (In Arabic), *Al-Watan Kuwaiti Newspaper*, March 4, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> The roots of the crisis go back to 2001, when Iran began drilling operations in the field, which prompted Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to agree to demarcate their maritime borders and plan for the development of joint oil reservoirs.

between Iran and Kuwait. The Islamic Republic reserves the right to exploit the gas field,” as it puts it. On the other hand, Kuwait, through its foreign minister, Ahmed Al-Sabah, expressed its rejection of Iranian statements regarding the field, stating that “Iran is not a party to the Durra field, as it is a purely Kuwaiti–Saudi field,” and indicating that Kuwait and Saudi Arabia alone have rights to exploit this field, in accordance with the agreements concluded between the two countries, and in accordance with international law and the rules for demarcating maritime borders.<sup>19</sup>

In 2015, the Kuwaiti ministry of interior announced the arrest of about 26 members of a terrorist cell (one Iranian and the rest Kuwaitis) and the confiscation of large quantities of weapons in the Abdali area, north of the capital of Kuwait, near the Iraqi border. With Iran and Hezbollah committing acts that would prejudice the unity and territorial integrity of the State of Kuwait, implicit reference was made to Iran’s involvement in the formation of a spy cell in Kuwait and the training of its members in Lebanon and at the Iranian embassy in Kuwait.<sup>20</sup> Later, the defendants took advantage of their release after an appeals court found them innocent, pending the issuance of the verdict of discrimination, and fled to Iran, whereupon Kuwait announced the reduction of the level of Iranian diplomatic representation in Kuwait from nineteen diplomats to four.<sup>21</sup> The Iranian reaction came with a partial escalation against Kuwait, accusing Kuwait of having submitted to Saudi pressure to take this step.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, “Facts about the Disputed Al-Durra Gas Field between Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia” (In Arabic), March 29, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Hafeez Mahboub, *The Solid Refuge: Saudi Arabia in the Face of Iranian Impulses* (London: Dar any Books, 2017), p. 27.

On July 22, 2017, Kuwait reduced Iranian diplomatic representation to its lowest limits due to Iran’s threat to Kuwait’s internal security and the regional security system and its role in spreading chaos and instability in the region.<sup>22</sup>



*The logo of the Gulf Cooperation Council.*

The attitudes of the two countries toward the revolutions of the Arab Spring in 2011 varied greatly: while Kuwait considered the Arab Spring revolutions a large wave aimed at striking the stability of the Arab countries, including Kuwait, and bringing about fundamental changes in the structure of its powers, Iran considered the Arab Spring revolutions, with an exception of Syria, as a continuation of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and a response from the Arab peoples to the message of the Iranian revolution. The protests that swept Bahrain in February 2011 represented an important test for Kuwaiti–

<sup>21</sup> *Al-Qabas Kuwaiti Newspaper*, “Stop Disregarding Our Sovereignty, Iran,” July 19, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Abdullah Bani Hamim, *Iranian-Kuwaiti Relations between Continuity and Change*, International Institute for Iranian Studies, Aug. 3, 2017.

Iranian relations, as the Iranian side intervened forcefully in the crisis and encouraged the Bahraini opposition to bring about a political change in favor of the Shiite bloc in the Bahraini interior, but the entry of the Peninsula Shield forces into Bahrain, in which Kuwait participated, put an end to the deterioration of the situation in Bahrain.<sup>23</sup> Some Iranian leaders have expressed their opinion on the Kuwaiti role in the Peninsula Shield forces, where the Iranian leader Karim Abedi, a member of the Parliamentary Committee for National Security Affairs and Iranian Foreign Policy in 2012, stated:

What happened with the entry of armies from the Gulf states into Bahrain will not be repeated, and we will not allow it. By repeating it in Kuwait, the circumstances and location of Bahrain geographically and militarily are completely different from Kuwait, and the Islamic Republic of Iran has the right to enter Kuwait to protect the Shiites there, just as Gulf countries justified their entry to Bahrain by protecting the Sunnis there.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, for many years, the relationship between Iran and Kuwait has fluctuated between belligerence and cooperation. It has been characterized by entrenched distrust and hasty decision-making. Factors contributing to this relationship are various, and include Iran's expansionist policies, its continuous attempts at interference in the internal affairs of Kuwait, and the regional leadership battle

with Kuwait's regional closest ally, Saudi Arabia.

### **The Impact of Saudi–Iranian Rivalry on Kuwaiti–Saudi Relations**

The roots of Saudi–Kuwaiti relations began at the start of the twentieth century, when Kuwait hosted the founder of the modern Saudi state, King Abdul Aziz Al Saud, after the fall of Riyadh to the Al Rashid state in northern Saudi Arabia, followed by its recapture from the authority of Al Rashid. King Abdul Aziz, after the matter was settled in Riyadh, decided to expand his rule to an extent that prompted conflict with the Kuwaiti government at the time, during the era of Sheikh Salem Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah.<sup>25</sup> The conflict ended with the Uqair Protocol of 1922, which defined the borders between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and the establishment of a neutral zone between the two countries.<sup>26</sup> Economic differences between the two countries began to emerge after the Uqair agreement, and ended in 1940 after a peaceful settlement was reached under British auspices. On April 20, 1942, the two countries signed several agreements aimed at regulating political, economic, and security relations, and one of the main results of these agreements was the establishment of the divided zone between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in what was known as the neutral zone in 1965, which resulted in the delineation of borderlands between the two countries reflecting the balance of power at the time in the region.<sup>27</sup> In 2000, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia also concluded a maritime boundary agreement that settled the issue of the final

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<sup>23</sup> Fatima Al-Smadi, *Reports: Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives of Building the Iranian Central*, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, November 8, 2016, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Telescope for Studies, Affairs and Reports, Political, *The Future of Iranian-Kuwaiti Relations* (In Arabic), 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Hadi Hamad, "Najdi-Kuwaiti Relations until 1932" (In Arabic), *Journal of Human Sciences* (College of Education, Majdal) Vol. 33, No. 1 (March 2016), pp. 244–47.

<sup>26</sup> The Algerian Encyclopedia of Political and Strategic Studies, "The Historical Roots of the Dispute (Saudi–Kuwaiti) on Fire under Embers in the Divided Region."

<sup>27</sup> Arabi Post, "The Silent Dispute. The story of the Neutral Zone between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, in Which Oil Production Has Been Disrupted for Years," (In Arabic) July 25, 2019.



boundary between the two countries. During the period between 2009 and 2019, a dispute between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia over the divided zone led to a halt in hydrocarbon production, starting in 2014, until the final border arrangements were reached, but the different interpretations of the Kuwaiti–Saudi border problems led to a fifth agreement in 2019. Its aim was to achieve greater clarity and settle the question of boundaries.<sup>28</sup>

**The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is considered to be one of the most prolonged rivalries in the Middle East's modern history, and the enmity between both countries is a persistent feature of Middle East geopolitics.**

The area of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents 83.45 percent of the total area of the Gulf states, while the State of Kuwait represents 0.4 percent of this area. Geography has linked the fate of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, as has the depth of religious, cultural, and family ties between its citizens, and they are characterized by homogeneity of identity and values. In educational, cultural, and social affairs, there is a kind of contact and overlap between the borders of the two countries, as the Saudi borders expand to extend over the area of the State of Kuwait so that it constitutes a strategic depth for it, and the geographical reality also makes any threat to Kuwait a direct source of threat to the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, making Kuwait almost the first line of defense for Saudi lands.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was one of the most important political milestones for Kuwait. Kuwait entered the arena of military confrontation by closing the Iraqi oil pipeline extending through its territory to the Red Sea and decided to compensate for the shortfall in

oil production by increasing its production by two million barrels per day to maintain the stability of its market in the world. Then the kingdom opened its lands and bases to receive the Arab, Islamic, and friendly forces that had been summoned. To remove and repel the aggression, these forces were placed under a joint Saudi command. In the

beginning, Kuwait became closer to the Saudi state, as its leaders sought to draw closer to the kingdom in the wake of that invasion. That experience showed the fragility of the Kuwaiti political presence in a turbulent region characterized by conflicts over sovereignty and influence between major regional and international states. Despite the apparent consensus between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia on the necessity of confronting the invasion and its causes, there was a fundamental difference between them: the Kuwaitis saw the necessity of uprooting the Iraqi regime from its roots, as they considered it fundamentally hostile to them, while the Saudi desire was limited to overthrowing Saddam Hussein while maintaining the political system so as not to bring about a deep fundamental change in Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia comes at the top of Kuwait's foreign policy priorities, as Kuwaiti diplomacy is always keen to activate cooperation and support rapprochement with Saudi Arabia at all levels. At the bilateral and Gulf level, Saudi–Kuwaiti talks take place regularly in the wake of the crises facing the

<sup>28</sup> Bader Al-Seif, *The Kuwaiti–Saudi Border: Resilience is a Pillar of Stability*, Malcolm Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, July 19, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Nayef bin Hathlin, *The Allied Struggle: Saudi Arabia and the United States since 1962*, trans. Ahmed Maghribi (Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 2013), p. 48.

Arab Gulf states and the Arab world, and the position of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia often leads to consensus in visions about those crises, and with regard to Iran, the position of the two countries coincides in rejecting Iranian threats to Gulf countries. At the Gulf level, the two sides seek to crystallize a unified Gulf position in dealing with Iran, through coordinating efforts within the framework of the GCC. As for the Palestinian issue, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait agree on how to deal with it. Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of this consensus is evident in the rejection of normalization with Israel by each of them and their keenness to provide material and moral support to the Palestinian people at all levels. However, this does not prevent the existence of some differences between them, such as their unilateral positions on Iran, where Kuwait and Iran reach levels of friendly relations.<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the position of the two countries on the Gulf crisis and the boycott of the Emirate of Qatar in 2017, throughout that crisis, Kuwait showed a position of neutrality regarding the boycott of Qatar. Nonetheless, Kuwait continued to play the role of mediator between the Gulf states. During the Gulf summit held in Riyadh in December 2018, which the Emir of Qatar did not attend, and the minister of state for foreign affairs attended on his behalf, the Emir of Kuwait delivered a speech in which he criticized the sharp media exchange between the conflicting parties, urged the use of a calm media tone, and looked forward to resolving the dispute as soon as possible.<sup>31</sup>

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, Saudi Arabia abandoned its traditional foreign policy track in favor of a more dominant one. Saudi Arabia has traditionally attempted to influence the other Gulf countries to align with Riyadh, but it has redoubled this effort in the post-2011 period. Saudi Arabia took a counterrevolutionary position against the Arab uprisings and revolutions and expected other countries in the Gulf to follow suit. Saudi Arabia attempted to pressure countries like Kuwait and Bahrain to provide financial support to the Egyptian government. Saudi Arabia foreign policy became more assertive in the early period of King Salman's rule.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is considered to be one of the most prolonged rivalries in the Middle East's modern history, and the enmity between both countries is a persistent feature of Middle East geopolitics. The events, crises, and conflicts in the region from 1971 to 2015 marked the beginning of the conflict and competition for hegemony in the Arab Gulf region between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as each country tried to exploit these crises and conflicts to its advantage. The success of the Iranian revolution and the fall of the Shah's regime in 1979 marked the beginning of Iran's transition from seeking hegemony in conjunction with Saudi Arabia and the United States to trying to dominate the region unilaterally. Iran became the most destabilizing actor in the Gulf region. This created a conflict with Saudi Arabia to lead the region. Over time, the dispute between them turned into an ideological, religious,

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<sup>30</sup> Moataz Salameh, *Gulf Cooperation Council States and Iranian Nuclear Commissioners* (In Arabic), Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Sept. 8, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Policies Unit, *The Siege of Qatar: Contexts for Continuing the Crisis and Prospects for Resolving It* (In Arabic), Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, June 3, 2020, pp. 1–6.

<sup>32</sup> Telci, İ. N. , Rakipoglu, M. "Hedging as a Survival Strategy for Small States: The Case of Kuwait". *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 10 (2021 ): 213-229.

political, and military battle. The Iranian regime uses all mechanisms and means to dominate the countries of the region, and Iran has directly sought to change the ruling regimes in the Arab Gulf states through Shiite Islamic political movements in these countries or by seeking to monopolize the representation of Shiites in those countries with Shiite presence under the pretext of protecting them. The occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and the Arab Spring revolutions (2001–2011) turned Iran into a major regional player in four Arab countries: Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain. Since then, tension has escalated between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the differences between them have sharpened in all regional issues.

Under this atmosphere of Saudi–Iranian competition, the Kuwaiti strategy has been based on sheltering from the conflicts of the major powers in the region by seeking, in the first place, to preserve its existence. Kuwait has been keen to look for an influential regional role to relieve the pressures of those countries and to prevent expansionist attempts.

As a result of the geographical dilemma of the State of Kuwait, it has tried to adopt inexpensive foreign policies, which tend to

be cautious, and to avoid provoking crises with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In implementing its foreign policy, it has relied heavily on multilateral diplomatic tools, international conferences, and regional organizations, as well as economic relations, so its external decisions are more related to maximizing economic gains and benefits.

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