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RESPONSES OF GULF STATES TO THE PALESTINE-ISRAEL CONFLICT IN POST 7TH OCTOBER 2023©Σ

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ABSTRACT

The events of 7th October 2023 marked a turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics, prompting Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to reassess their foreign policy approaches to the escalating Israel-Palestine conflict. This study explores shifts in GCC foreign policies post-escalation through the lens of Realist theory, focusing on national interests, security concerns, and state survival amid regional instability. Employing qualitative methods, including historical analysis and data triangulation, the research analyses policy statements, reports, and scholarly sources to uncover the motivations behind individual state actions. The findings reveal significant disparities in GCC responses. Saudi Arabia suspended normalisation talks with Israel to align with pro-Palestinian sentiment, while Qatar intensified mediation efforts and expanded humanitarian support. The UAE and Bahrain, balancing diplomatic ties with Israel and public concerns, adopted more cautious stances. Oman maintained neutrality, while Kuwait upheld a strongly pro-Palestinian position. The lack of unified GCC action highlights the bloc's fragmented nature, driven by diverging national priorities and geopolitical alliances. This study sheds light on the complexities of GCC diplomacy and its limitations in formulating a cohesive response to the conflict. By examining these dynamics, the research provides insights into regional geopolitics and proposes strategies to foster unity within the GCC, enhancing its role in addressing the Palestine-Israel conflict and broader regional challenges.

Keywords: diplomatic relations; GCC states; geopolitical strategy; Palestine-Israel conflict; Realism

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RESPONS NEGARA-NEGARA TELUK TERHADAP KONFLIK PALESTIN-ISRAEL PASCA 7 OKTOBER 2023

NASRUDDIN KHALID AND BAKRI MAT

ABSTRAK

Peristiwa 7 Oktober 2023 menandakan titik perubahan dalam geopolitik Timur Tengah, yang mendorong negara-negara Majlis Kerjasama Teluk (GCC) untuk menilai semula pendekatan dasar luar mereka terhadap konflik Israel-Palestin yang semakin memuncak. Kajian ini meneroka perubahan dalam dasar luar GCC pasca-pemuncakan konflik melalui lensa teori Realisme, dengan menumpukan pada kepentingan nasional, kebimbangan keselamatan, dan kelangsungan negara di tengah-tengah ketidakstabilan serantau. Menggunakan kaedah kualitatif, termasuk analisis sejarah dan triangulasi data, penyelidikan ini menganalisis kenyataan dasar, laporan, dan sumber ilmiah untuk mengenal pasti motivasi di sebalik tindakan setiap negara. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan perbezaan ketara dalam respons GCC. Arab Saudi menangguhkan rundingan normalisasi dengan Israel untuk menyelaraskan tindakan dengan sentimen pro-Palestin, manakala Qatar meningkatkan usaha mediasi dan memperluaskan sokongan kemanusiaan. UAE dan Bahrain, dalam usaha menyeimbangkan hubungan diplomatik dengan Israel dan kebimbangan awam, mengambil sikap lebih berhati-hati. Oman kekal neutral, manakala Kuwait mengekalkan pendirian pro-Palestin yang tegas. Ketiadaan tindakan bersama yang padu dalam kalangan GCC menonjolkan sifat berpecah blok ini, didorong oleh keutamaan nasional dan pakatan geopolitik yang berbeza. Kajian ini menyoroti kerumitan diplomasi GCC serta keterbatasannya dalam merangka respons kolektif terhadap konflik ini. Dengan menganalisis dinamika ini, kajian ini memberikan pandangan tentang geopolitik serantau dan mencadangkan strategi untuk memperkukuhkan perpaduan dalam GCC, sekali gus meningkatkan peranannya dalam menangani konflik Israel-Palestin dan cabaran serantau yang lebih luas.

Kata kunci: *hubungan diplomatik; konflik Israel-Palestin; negara GCC; Realisme; strategi geopolitik*

Introduction

The Palestine-Israel conflict has long been a defining and contentious issue in Middle Eastern geopolitics, marked by its complexity, persistence, and far-reaching consequences. The events of 7th October 2023, which saw a large-scale attack by Hamas on Israel and subsequent military retaliation, represent a significant turning point, reshaping regional dynamics and international attention. Within this context, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman—face renewed scrutiny for their varied responses to the conflict.

While GCC states share geographic proximity, economic influence, and cultural ties, their reactions to the Palestine-Israel conflict have often been shaped by individual national interests rather than collective organisational actions. This divergence became particularly evident post-October 2023, as public sentiment, humanitarian crises, and shifting geopolitical alliances influenced each state's stance. The significance of these responses lies in their potential to impact regional stability, international diplomacy, and the evolving trajectory of the Palestine-Israel conflict.

This article evaluates the changes in GCC states' policies and actions following the escalation, with a particular focus on their foreign policy adjustments and the application of Realist theory. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how GCC states navigate the intricate balance between domestic pressures, regional alliances, and global diplomatic priorities.

Background

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981, uniting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman in a regional alliance aimed at fostering economic, political, and security cooperation. While the GCC is rooted in shared cultural and religious values, its members have frequently adopted distinct foreign policy strategies, reflecting diverse national interests and external influences.

Historically, the GCC states have approached the Palestine-Israel conflict through the lens of Arab solidarity and support for Palestinian rights, often framing the issue as a central tenet of their foreign policies. However, this unity has been tested by shifting geopolitical realities, such as the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, which normalised relations between Israel and some Gulf states, including the UAE and Bahrain. These agreements underscored a pragmatic shift prioritising economic and security benefits over ideological commitments to the Palestinian cause.

The events of 7th October 2023 further exacerbated these divisions, as the unprecedented violence and humanitarian crisis in Gaza forced GCC states to reassess their diplomatic and political strategies. Saudi Arabia, for instance, paused its normalisation talks with Israel, while Qatar intensified its mediation efforts, leveraging its ties with Hamas to negotiate ceasefires and provide humanitarian aid. Conversely, the

UAE and Bahrain sought to balance their established relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords with the growing public and regional support for the Palestinian cause.

This nuanced and often fragmented approach underscores the complexity of GCC states' foreign policies, driven by national security interests, external alliances, and domestic considerations. The aftermath of the October 2023 escalation highlights the limitations of collective GCC action, revealing instead the predominance of state-centric strategies shaped by Realist principles of national interest and survival.

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three main themes. The SPIDER framework is applied in this qualitative study to ensure the research question is systematically developed and well-defined. Materials for the literature review were obtained from several data sources, including scholarly articles, journals from 2018 to 2024, and books. The literature has been carefully reviewed, identified and systematically summarised, following the three selected thematic approaches, namely: i. Regional and Economic Security Dynamics; ii. Geopolitical and Diplomatic Relations; and iii. External Influences and Alliances.

Regional and Economic Security Dynamics.

The Gulf states have historically prioritised collective security to safeguard regional stability, often shaped by economic and security considerations. According to Pollack (2003), the GCC was founded during the Iran-Iraq War as a mechanism to protect member states from regional spillovers and extremist ideologies. The formation of the GCC highlighted the shared recognition of external threats to regional stability. However, these collective efforts were often tempered by state-centric priorities. (Almutairi et al. 2021: 93).

The U.S.-GCC security partnership reflects the interplay between economic security and strategic alliances. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Gulf states faced heightened threats from regional radicalism and instability, prompting stronger defence cooperation with the U.S. (Shayan, 2017). For instance, U.S. forces ensured the security of Kuwait's vital oilfields and bolstered Qatar's military infrastructure amidst perceived threats from Iran and Iraq. Economic interdependence plays a critical role in Gulf security strategies. The Gulf states rely heavily on resource stability, making regional peace essential for safeguarding oil production and trade. However, despite these economic-security dynamics, GCC states have often diverged in their responses to regional crises, reflecting fragmented priorities rather than unified strategies (Shayan, 2017).

Geopolitical and Diplomatic Relations.

The geopolitical and diplomatic strategies of Gulf states are deeply rooted in their national security interests and regional alliances. Despite the symbolic importance of the Palestine-Israel conflict within the Arab and Muslim world, Gulf states have

historically prioritised pragmatic alliances over ideological commitments. Abbas (2024) identifies factors such as proximity, severity of consequences, and alignment with foreign policy objectives as central to shaping Gulf states' involvement in conflict resolution.

Diplomacy remains a vital tool for balancing competing interests (Mohammed & Ahmad 2020). States like Qatar and Oman utilise mediation to enhance their strategic neutrality, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain have embraced normalisation with Israel under the Abraham Accords to foster economic growth and security cooperation. This pragmatic diplomacy underscores the prioritisation of national interest over regional solidarity.

The events of 7th October 2023 disrupted this trajectory. Saudi Arabia paused its normalisation discussions, reflecting the need to align with public sentiment and maintain regional credibility (Daga & Simonelli 2023). Meanwhile, the UAE and Bahrain balanced their existing ties with Israel against growing regional and humanitarian concerns (Abbas, 2024). These responses illustrate the fragmented nature of GCC diplomacy, driven more by individual state interests than by cohesive regional strategies.

External Influences and Alliances.

External actors, including the United States, China, and Iran, significantly influence the foreign policies of GCC states. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, for example, seeks to maintain its leadership role in the Arab world while balancing Western alliances and regional autonomy. The October War oil embargo elevated the Gulf states' global political influence, enabling them to leverage their resources in shaping the Palestine-Israel conflict (Kupchan, 2011).

The U.S. remains a pivotal ally, offering security guarantees in exchange for access to Gulf oil. However, GCC states have also explored alternative alliances, such as with China and Russia, to counterbalance Western influence. This strategic diversification reflects their Realist approach, wherein power dynamics and survival shape foreign policy decisions. At the same time, regional tensions with Iran have heightened GCC security concerns, driving their closer cooperation with external powers. The post-October 2023 escalation has further complicated these dynamics, forcing Gulf states to recalibrate their policies amidst intensifying external pressures and domestic demands (Issaev & Kozhanov 2021).

Synthesis of the Literature Review

The Gulf states' responses to the Palestine-Israel conflict are shaped by a complex interplay of regional security concerns, pragmatic diplomacy, and external alliances. Past studies reveal that the GCC states, despite their shared cultural and religious identity, often prioritise national interest and survival over collective action.

The Abraham Accords of 2020 exemplify this fragmentation, with the UAE and Bahrain pursuing economic partnerships with Israel, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait maintained traditional pro-Palestinian stances. Saudi Arabia's cautious approach, particularly its decision to maintain the status quo post-October 7th 2023, reflects a balancing act between domestic pressures, regional leadership, and strategic priorities. This cautious diplomacy contrasts with Qatar's proactive humanitarian efforts and Oman's neutrality, further illustrating the diversity in Gulf state strategies.

Existing literature often overlooks the significant shifts in GCC responses post-October 2023, particularly how these changes reflect Realist principles of state-centric priorities. This research addresses this gap, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of GCC foreign policies and their implications for regional stability and international relations.

Research Methodology

This article aims to find factors that have influenced Gulf states' response to the Palestine-Israel conflict as the unit of analysis in the international organisation associated with GCC states' foreign policy, national security interests and external influences and alliances post 7th October 2023. This article needs to consider not only the states' strategies through policies and behaviour in international organisation cooperation but also the individual states' interests and state-centric factors which will affect their commitment.

An exploratory approach is particularly suited to this study, as it aims to investigate the less-explored dynamics of how Gulf states navigate the complexities of the Palestine-Israel conflict amidst changing geopolitical conditions. This approach allows for the identification of emerging trends, motivations, and behaviours that might not yet be fully documented or understood in the existing literature. By employing exploratory methods, the research delves deeper into the underlying perceptions, leadership dynamics, and decision-making processes shaping Gulf states' foreign policies and diplomatic engagements.

In addition, a historical analysis approach is integrated to trace the evolution of Gulf states' policies and actions regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict. This involves examining past events, policy developments, and historical relationships to contextualise the responses post-7th October 2023. Understanding the historical underpinnings of Gulf states' strategies provides insights into how their current policies are influenced by long-standing geopolitical concerns, shifts in alliances, and prior engagements with both Israel and Palestine.

Qualitative methods are particularly well suited to this research paper. This method allows the researcher to explore underlying motivations, perceptions and dynamics shaping Gulf states' behaviour in greater depth. On the other hand, the unity of the Gulf states has been influenced by subjective factors such as perceptions of security threats, national interest and leadership dynamics, which are best explored with qualitative rather than quantitative methods.

Data Collection and Sources

The research relies on secondary data sources, including scholarly articles, policy statements, official government reports, and credible media coverage. By drawing on diverse and authoritative sources, the study ensures a comprehensive and well-rounded analysis of the shifts in GCC policies. Special emphasis is placed on examining statements, actions, and positions articulated by individual GCC states during and after the 7th October 2023 escalation.

To enhance data validity, a triangulation method is employed, comparing data across multiple sources to identify patterns and corroborate findings. This technique ensures consistency, reliability, and credibility in the interpretation of the collected data. Triangulation involves analysing scholarly literature, official policy documents, and media narratives to cross-verify the consistency and accuracy of the information.

Discussion and Findings

The events of 7th October 2023 marked a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern geopolitics, profoundly influencing the foreign policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The unprecedented Hamas attack on Israel, involving rocket launches, ground incursions, and hostage-taking, led to severe casualties in Israel and a retaliatory military response that devastated Gaza and triggered a humanitarian crisis (Selján 2024). These events reignited global focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict and sparked protests across GCC nations, amplifying public pressure on governments to take decisive stances.

The GCC states' responses highlighted significant variations in their foreign policy approaches, shaped by domestic pressures and strategic considerations. While Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar issued statements condemning Israeli actions and expressing solidarity with Palestine (GCCSG, 2023), others, such as the UAE and Bahrain, maintained cautious rhetoric to balance their ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords. Saudi Arabia, in response to regional sentiment, paused its normalisation discussions with Israel and proposed a UN resolution advocating for a ceasefire.

Immediate Responses by Gulf States

Initially, Saudi Arabia emphasised the need for resolving the Palestinian issue, highlighting the importance of a fair and just outcome. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) echoed this stance, cautioning against potential aggressive actions. However, the UAE's approach differed from its previous military interventions, such as in Yemen, as it adopted a more diplomatic and conciliatory tone in its public statements. This shift occurred despite moments of public criticism directed at Qatar, indicating that underlying tensions persisted even as relations improved. Similarly, Bahrain expressed deep concern over the violence affecting both Palestinian and Israeli civilians, reaffirming the critical need for peace and stability in the Middle East (Abumbe et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar condemned the attacks on unarmed Palestinians and highlighted the importance of resuming peace negotiations (Amwaj Media 2023). The GCC collectively acknowledged the requirement for engagement in the conflict, albeit with variations in their specific approaches. Kuwait preferred more discreet discussions, while the UAE favoured enhanced coordination with supportive Arab and European states. Saudi Arabia prominently asserted its role in peace initiatives by reaffirming its dedication to advancing an Arab working plan. In the aftermath of the conflict, reports indicated that the UAE proposed a plan addressing three determinants, which are the full withdrawal of Israeli Forces, Palestinian Self-Governance and a clear path to a Two-State Solution (AlKetbi 2024).

The operation on 7th October 2023 prompted a swift and severe Israeli military counter-offensive in Gaza, leading to extensive destruction and a substantial humanitarian crisis. The unprecedented level of violence drew immediate reactions from nations worldwide, particularly those within the GCC, which found themselves in a precarious situation. Each GCC state, holding varying degrees of diplomatic and economic connections with both Israel and the Palestinians, faced the challenge of balancing geopolitical interests, regional alliances, and the strong emotional affiliations of their populations with the Palestinian cause (Ulrichsen 2023).

i. Saudi Arabia: Cautious Diplomacy and Advocacy for De-escalation

As the most influential GCC member and a critical actor in Middle Eastern geopolitics, Saudi Arabia's response characterised itself through careful diplomacy. At the time of the assault, Saudi Arabia had been engaged in advanced deliberations to normalise relations with Israel, steered by U.S. mediation. The eruption of violence, however, necessitated re-evaluating its diplomatic strategy (The New Arab 2023). In the immediate aftermath, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement advocating to end hostilities and urging restraint from both parties (Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2023). The Kingdom reaffirmed its long-standing commitment to the Palestinian issue, emphasising support for a two-state solution based on 1967 borders and identifying East Jerusalem as the future capital of a Palestinian state (Daga & Simonelli 2023).

While maintaining its ongoing negotiations with Israel prior to the attack, Saudi Arabia criticised the disproportionate Israeli military response in Gaza, imploring the international community to protect Palestinian civilians (The New Arab 2023). The Kingdom’s response illustrates a delicate balancing act between its historical role as a defender of Palestinian rights and burgeoning geopolitical considerations, particularly concerns about countering Iranian influence through potential normalisation with Israel (Safdar 2024). Nevertheless, the intensity of the conflict and prevailing pro-Palestinian sentiments complicate the path toward normalisation, adding a layer of political sensitivity.

ii. United Arab Emirates: Pragmatic Approach Amidst Tensions

The UAE, which entered the Abraham Accords in 2020, has fostered considerable diplomatic and economic relations with Israel, placing it in a complex position following the escalation on 7th October. Mirroring Saudi Arabia's stance, the UAE government called for an immediate ceasefire and restraint from all sides (The New Arab 2023). However, due to its deepening ties with Israel, the UAE's response appeared more neutral and pragmatic, particularly in comparison to its Gulf counterparts maintaining a more substantial alignment with the Palestinian narrative. On 8th October, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern about rising violence and advocated for international efforts to de-escalate tensions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates 2023).

This diplomatic approach emphasised conflict resolution, aligning with its strategic interests that emphasise regional stability and the continuation of economic partnerships with Israel (Rachna 2023). Simultaneously, the UAE reiterated its commitment to the Palestinian cause, framing its relationship with Israel as a potential conduit for more effective advocacy. Internally, the UAE leadership faced challenges managing public perceptions, as domestic sentiment largely sympathises with the Palestinian plight, necessitating a careful balancing act between foreign policy objectives and public expectations.

iii. Qatar: Strong Support for Palestine and Mediation Initiatives

Qatar, recognised for its strong ties to Hamas and vocal backing of Palestinian resistance, responded promptly to the 7th October events (Aras & Al Ansari, 2024). The Qatari government condemned the Israeli military actions in Gaza, denouncing them as illegal aggression and urging immediate international intervention to halt the violence. Qatar's firm stance underscored its long-established policy advocating for Palestinian self-determination whilst opposing Israeli occupation (Safdar 2024). With a history of providing significant humanitarian aid to Gaza and maintaining diplomatic channels with both Hamas and Israel, Qatar positioned itself as a potential mediator in the evolving conflict. Leading diplomatic efforts, Qatari officials, including Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, sought to broker ceasefires and coordinate humanitarian responses for those impacted by the conflict (Al-Mohannadi 2024). Qatar's state-run media, particularly Al Jazeera, played an instrumental role in amplifying the Palestinian narrative and coverage of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, showcasing Qatar's unique diplomatic strategy. Despite maintaining a more strained relationship with Israel than its Gulf counterparts, Qatar's mediating capabilities remain a prominent feature of its foreign policy.

iv.Kuwait: Firm Commitment to Palestine

Kuwait's response to the developments following 7th October was notably aligned with pro-Palestinian sentiments, marking one of the strongest reactions among GCC states (The New Arab 2023). Kuwait, with a consistent historical stance advocating for Palestinian rights, has firmly opposed normalisation with Israel throughout its foreign

policy. Following the attacks, Kuwait's government expressed unequivocal condemnation of the Israeli military response, voicing solidarity with the Palestinian population (Rahman 2023). The Kuwaiti National Assembly also issued supportive declarations, denouncing the violence and advocating for international action in defence of Palestinian rights. Public demonstrations in Kuwait City highlighted widespread citizen outrage regarding Israeli actions, reinforcing the populace's dedication to the Palestinian cause. Kuwait's strong position reflects a convergence of governmental policy and public opinion, fostering a consistent commitment to the two-state solution while affirming solidarity with the Palestinian people (Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States 2023).

v. Bahrain and Oman: Advocacy for Peace and Stability

Bahrain and Oman, typically adopting subdued foreign policy stances within the GCC, responded to the 7th October events by advocating for peace and stability in the region (The New Arab 2023). Bahrain, which normalised relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, trod carefully, attempting to sustain diplomatic relations with Israel while expressing concern for Palestinian civilians. The Bahraini government urged an immediate halt to violence, emphasising the necessity for dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution (Bahrain Forum for Human Rights 2023). Similarly, Oman, known for its neutral mediation role in regional disputes, called for a ceasefire and encouraged both parties to ensure a return to negotiations. Oman's response adhered to its practice of quiet diplomacy, focusing on de-escalating tensions while refraining from adopting an intensely public stance against either side (The New Arab 2023).

The events following the 7th October attacks highlighted the complex political dynamics within the GCC states. While all six nations' immediate reactions called for de-escalation, their varied responses reflected different geopolitical priorities and domestic pressures. Some countries expressed strong support for Palestine, while others aimed to preserve diplomatic ties with Israel as part of broader strategies.

Shift in Policy and Response

In the aftermath of heightened violence and a humanitarian crisis in Gaza following the events of 7th October 2023, coupled with the initiation of the Israeli ground invasion in November, the GCC states have adapted their approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Since the 1990s, GCC nations have adopted a measured posture towards this conflict, recognising the limits of their diplomatic leverage given the United States' role as the primary intermediary (Abbas 2024). Additionally, shifting geopolitical elements in the Middle East, notably the U.S.-endorsed Abraham Accords and the rising concern over Iranian influence, have lessened the centrality of the Palestine-Israel issue in the region. This context has fostered a consensus among GCC states favouring a pragmatic approach rather than overtly aligning with either side in contentious situations, particularly regarding the crisis in Gaza (Abbas 2024).

However, as the humanitarian conditions deteriorate, the GCC's former neutrality has evolved into a more assertive and pro-Palestinian stance. This transition underscores the

necessity for GCC governments to balance hard and soft power strategies, thereby integrating economic, humanitarian and diplomatic initiatives to influence the unfolding situation effectively. To demonstrate proactive engagement and avoid portraying themselves as passive observers, GCC states have pursued political and economic strategies to foster a coalition comprising both regional counterparts and international allies, thereby presenting a united front in support of Palestinian interests (Shaban et al. 2024). The escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict on 7th October 2023, represented a critical test for the effectiveness of the Abraham Accords, revealing the complexity of diplomatic relations within the GCC. The UAE and Bahrain, as key signatories, faced particularly challenging dynamics in the wake of the violence. Conversely, the responses of other GCC members (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman) illustrated a spectrum of approaches to manage domestic pressures, regional affiliations, and overarching foreign policy goals. Collectively, the GCC confronted the challenge of balancing public sentiment, exerting regional influence, and safeguarding foreign policy interests in an increasingly polarised Middle Eastern environment.

i. United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain: The Abraham Accords Signatories

The UAE continued to maintain its diplomatic engagement with Israel while condemning the violence and emphasising its commitment to Palestinian advocacy. Although the UAE adapted its rhetoric to embrace a more humanitarian and compassionate tone, it was careful to refrain from directly criticising its established relationship with Israel. The government accentuated the importance of fostering dialogue and promoting a peaceful resolution to ongoing conflicts, reaffirming its commitment and intention to act as a mediator in the region. In doing so, it focused on providing crucial humanitarian aid and logistical support to the people of Gaza. This approach was strategically aimed at dissipating any potential domestic backlash regarding its ties with Israel and emphasising the UAE's role in facilitating peace and stability for all parties involved. (Faheema, 2023)

Bahrain's reaction aligned closely with that of the UAE, preserving the framework of the Abraham Accords while promoting Palestinian rights. With a smaller, predominantly pro-Palestinian populace, Bahrain encountered a more complex and nuanced challenge in balancing its international relationships. The Bahraini government emphasised the importance of diplomacy and actively advocated for a two-state solution through various international mechanisms. This approach allowed it to express a degree of support for Palestine while avoiding a confrontation with the established accords with Israel (Abbas, 2024) (Krasna, 2024).

The normalisation of relations between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel under the Abraham Accords has compelled both nations to navigate a complex diplomatic landscape that intertwines their commitments to the Palestinian cause with the necessity of maintaining regional stability. A cautious stance can characterise their diplomatic approach; both countries have articulated their apprehensions regarding the surge in violence and have urged for restraint. The emphasis on dialogue and diplomatic mechanisms to resolve the foundational issues of the Israeli Palestinian conflict highlights their inclination to foster a stable diplomatic climate. Moreover, there has been a discernible shift from focusing on military collaboration to prioritising economic

cooperation and humanitarian initiatives in the aftermath of the conflict. This transition aligns with the overarching goals of the Abraham Accords, which were designed to enhance economic relationships and promote regional stability while addressing humanitarian concerns (Moniruzzaman, 2024).

Notably, despite their diplomatic normalisation with Israel, both the UAE and Bahrain have reiterated their support for Palestinian rights and the imperative of achieving a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict. This stance illustrates their effort to balance strategic interests related to co-operation with Israel against their domestic and regional responsibilities to advocate for the Palestinian cause. The responses of the UAE and Bahrain following the events of 7th October reflect a strategic recalibration that aims to uphold the fundamental principles of the Abraham Accords while also addressing the pressing humanitarian and political challenges that have arisen from the renewed hostilities (Suhail, 2024).

ii. Saudi Arabia: A Balancing Act Between Diplomacy and Domestic Pressures

Saudi Arabia's current deliberations concerning the normalisation of relations with Israel have become more delicate, particularly following the events leading up to 7th October. The recent outbreak of violence has compelled Saudi Arabia to pause its normalisation discussions with Israel, indicating a notable political shift that is primarily driven by significant domestic and regional pressures. This reaction indicates the strong pro-Palestinian sentiment prevalent among the Saudi public. The Saudi leadership has reiterated its commitment to supporting Palestinian statehood and has condemned Israel's actions while calling for an end to hostilities (Abbas 2024).

a. ***Role in Regional Leadership.*** As a pivotal member of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Saudi Arabia has utilised its diplomatic clout to promote collective action regarding the ongoing conflict. The Kingdom has reaffirmed its support for a two-state solution and has engaged in mediation efforts focused on establishing ceasefire arrangements and providing humanitarian aid to Gaza. The violence witnessed in October 2023 has highlighted the complexities and evolving dynamics of Saudi foreign policy, wherein reaffirming solidarity with Palestinian rights has taken precedence over normalisation with Israel (Suhail, 2024).

b. ***Domestic Considerations***. Within the Kingdom, there exists considerable public opposition to normalisation with Israel, particularly in the context of ongoing violence and human rights issues impacting the Palestinian population. The government encounters pressure from diverse societal factions, including religious groups and activists, who resist any concessions to Israel. This domestic dissent complicates the Kingdom’s capacity to pursue closer relations with Israel without risking backlash (Suhail, 2024).

c. ***Influence on Regional Stability***. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is further shaped by its imperative to maintain regional stability. The Kingdom has been actively involved in various diplomatic initiatives to mediate conflicts, particularly concerning Iran and Yemen. Balancing these intricate relationships while managing

its connection with Israel adds another layer of complexity to its diplomatic efforts (Khan, 2024).

d. ***International Relations Dynamics***. The United States has played a crucial role in facilitating dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Israel, advocating for normalisation as part of a comprehensive strategy to bolster security cooperation within the region. However, Saudi leadership remains cautious about appearing overly aligned with U.S. interests, particularly if such alignment risks alienating its populace or straining relations with other Arab nations (Suhail, 2024).

iii. Qatar: Mediator and Supporter of Palestine

Qatar's historical backing of Palestine, coupled with its position as a host for Hamas leadership, has facilitated a nuanced response to the developments following 7th October, free from the constraints that normalised relations with Israel would impose.

a. ***Mediation and Diplomatic Efforts.*** Qatar has intensified its mediation role in the Israeli Palestinian conflict by unequivocally denouncing Israeli military actions and advocating for Palestinian resistance while simultaneously calling for an immediate ceasefire. This strategic engagement includes negotiations with various Palestinian factions and international stakeholders to ensure humanitarian aid delivery (Suhail, 2024).

b. ***Humanitarian Assistance.*** Qatar's growing financial and material support to Gaza highlights its dedication to the welfare of the Palestinian people and its historical commitment to humanitarian aid. This involvement reflects Qatar's strategic role in Middle Eastern geopolitics, navigating complex alliances while asserting its influence in regional stability. The intricate relationships within the region make Qatar's initiatives significant, aligning its humanitarian efforts with broader geopolitical aims. By increasing support for Gaza, Qatar addresses immediate needs and seeks to enhance its influence in the evolving political landscape. As the Middle East faces diverse challenges, Qatar's initiatives represent a narrative of resilience and advocacy for Palestine, reinforcing its identity as a proponent of regional solidarity amid global diplomatic complexities (Khan, 2024).

c. ***Diplomatic Engagement***. Qatar has emerged as a neutral mediator in Palestinian territories through strategic diplomacy, fostering dialogue among key factions like Hamas and Fatah. Its unique role enables constructive engagement with both sides, promoting reconciliation efforts aimed at unifying Palestinian leadership. Amid a fragmented geopolitical landscape, Qatar's initiatives highlight potential collaboration and reflect a commitment to regional stability often disrupted by conflict. By nurturing dialogues, Qatar reinforces its significance as a regional player focused on peace and cooperative governance among Palestinian factions. The complexities of Palestinian politics make these diplomatic efforts both challenging and essential, acting as a vital conduit for unity that could reshape governance dynamics and enhance regional stability (Khan, 2024).

By channelling substantial financial resources into the Gaza Strip, Qatar has increased its influence among Palestinian factions, seen as a stabilising force that supports humanitarian efforts and cements its role as a mediator. Qatar has facilitated various negotiations to address the Palestinian conflict, providing a neutral setting for dialogue among different Palestinian groups and engaging both regional and international parties. Its foreign policy demonstrates a skilful balance in maintaining relationships with Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and other regional actors, enabling effective mediation within the complex Middle Eastern dynamics. Additionally, Qatar actively promotes Palestinian rights and their pursuit of statehood on the global stage, aligning its diplomatic strategies with the support of the Palestinian cause and appealing to its domestic and regional audiences (Abbas, 2024).

iv. Oman: A Neutral Diplomatic Stance

Oman's foreign policy demonstrates a consistent and systematic dedication to neutrality and restraint, particularly considering the significant events that transpired on 7th October, during a period characterised by regional unrest and instability. Oman's diplomatic approach in the context of the Palestinian Israeli conflict exemplifies nuanced and strategic neutrality, carefully navigating the turbulent waters of regional geopolitics (De Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024). By refraining from overtly criticising either party, Oman has effectively positioned itself as a potential arbiter, advocating instead for a cessation of hostilities and the commencement of meaningful dialogue. This calculated detachment not only enhances Oman's diplomatic rapport with both Israeli and Palestinian authorities but also underscores its aspiration to play a pivotal role in fostering peace. In articulating its support for Palestinian rights, Oman has consistently championed the two-state solution principle, framing it as a crucial pathway toward lasting peace and stability (Faheema 2023).

Following the events of 7th October 2023, Oman’s response has been shaped by its cautious diplomacy, particularly in the context of its low-level relations with Israel. Oman has long maintained a neutral stance, engaging Israel at a lower diplomatic level than some of its Gulf counterparts. This approach allows Oman to preserve its role as a mediator while carefully navigating the complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict (De Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024). Despite these low-level ties, Oman continues to prioritise peace efforts and mediation, using its unique position to foster dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian representatives. While it cautiously explores avenues for potential economic and diplomatic co-operation with Israel, Oman remains steadfast in its support for Palestinian rights and a fair resolution to the conflict. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza reinforces Oman’s commitment to providing aid while balancing its diplomatic outreach to Israel (De Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024).

Oman's cautious engagement with Israel reflects its broader strategy of ensuring that its relationships contribute to regional stability. By maintaining low-level relations, Oman can manage its diplomatic ties with Israel without compromising its advocacy for peace and Palestinian rights, positioning itself as a key actor in promoting dialogue and long-term stability in the region.

v. Kuwait: Strong Pro-Palestinian Stance

In the wake of the events of 7 October 2023, Kuwait reaffirmed its unwavering pro-Palestinian stance, taking a firm position in criticising Israeli actions. This position reflects Kuwait's historical commitment to supporting Palestine and its consistent advocacy for Palestinian rights in regional and international forums (Kuwait News Agency 2023).

a. ***Condemnation of Israeli actions.*** Kuwait's government was among the most vocal in denouncing Israeli military operations. Its statements underscored the need for immediate international intervention to protect Palestinian civilians, particularly in Gaza, where the humanitarian crisis worsened. Kuwait's criticism of Israel is deeply rooted in its long-standing foreign policy, which prioritises support for Palestine as a core Arab issue. The Kuwaiti government framed Israel's actions as violations of international law and called for accountability, positioning itself as a moral voice in the regional response to the conflict (Arab News 2023).

b. ***Active Diplomacy and Regional Leadership***. Kuwait's pro-Palestinian stance extends beyond mere condemnation, coupled with proactive diplomatic engagement. Leveraging its influence in vital international platforms, Kuwait has consistently pushed for a ceasefire and increased scrutiny of Israel's actions. Within the Arab League, Kuwait played a significant role in advocating for a unified Arab response, urging Arab states to consolidate their diplomatic pressure on Israel. This approach aligns with Kuwait's broader foreign policy strategy, emphasising Arab unity in defending Palestinian rights (Jones & Guzansky 2020).

Kuwait's engagement with the United Nations underscores its commitment to protecting Palestinian civilians and delivering humanitarian aid to impacted regions (Kuwait News Agency 2023). The nation's diplomatic strategy has emphasised the need for the international community to exert increased pressure on Israel to halt military operations and pursue diplomatic negotiations. Furthermore, Kuwait has been pivotal in advocating for the establishment of international accountability mechanisms that would oversee Israeli military conduct and ensure compliance with international humanitarian law. The multifaceted nature of Kuwait's efforts at regional and global levels reflects its ambition to assume a leadership position within the Arab world concerning the Palestinian issue. By harmonising its actions with a broader Arab consensus and implementing specific diplomatic initiatives, Kuwait bolsters its reputation as a consistent supporter of Palestine (Abbas 2024).

In summary, the GCC's varied responses to the escalation of violence on 7th October 2023 reveal the distinct geopolitical dynamics, internal pressures, and foreign policy aspirations influencing each state's actions. Whilst the UAE and Bahrain maintained formal diplomatic ties with Israel, they moderated their rhetoric to focus on humanitarian assistance and diplomacy. Saudi Arabia halted normalisation discussions to reaffirm its support for Palestinian statehood, while Qatar continued its role as a mediator and advocate for Palestine. Meanwhile, Oman and Kuwait retained strong positions in favour

of Palestinian rights, with Kuwait notably vocal against Israeli actions. The renewed conflict is indicative of the complexities and sensitivities in Gulf state policies towards Israel and Palestine, necessitating careful navigation of domestic and regional expectations in a rapidly evolving political landscape as explained in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The summary of shifting responses by GCC States prior to and post 7th October 2023.

GCC States	Prior to October 7th, 2023	Post-October 7th, 2023
UAE	Normalisation through Abraham Accords, focusing on economic ties and security cooperation	Maintained diplomatic ties with Israel, moderated rhetoric towards humanitarian aid and peace, emphasising dialogue to address conflict.
Bahrain	Followed UAE's stance under Abraham Accords, prioritising economic growth and security.	Balanced pro-Palestinian advocacy with maintaining normalisation framework, advocating a two-state solution and humanitarian concerns.
Saudi Arabia	Open to normalisation but cautious due to domestic and regional pressures, balancing leadership in Arab world.	Halted normalisation talks with Israel, focused on pro-Palestinian positions, called for ceasefires, and led mediation through the UN.
Qatar	Pro-Palestinian stance, mediator in conflict, hosting Hamas leadership, and providing humanitarian aid to Palestinians.	Intensified mediation efforts, advocated for ceasefires, and expanded humanitarian support for Gaza while maintaining pro-Palestinian advocacy.
Oman	Maintained neutrality and low-level diplomatic ties with Israel, focusing on mediation and advocating peace.	Continued neutrality, emphasised dialogue, provided humanitarian support, and supported the two-state solution.
Kuwait	Strong pro-Palestinian stance, vocal critic of Israel's actions, active in Arab League and international forums advocating Palestinian rights.	Amplified condemnation of Israeli actions, prioritised humanitarian aid, pushed for Arab unity, and supported international accountability mechanisms.

Source: Compiled by Authors (2024)

Analysing the Impact of Changing Response

In the wake of Hamas's shocking assault on Israel on 7th October 2023, and Israel's ruthless counterattack on Gaza, patterns in the responses of the GCC states have shifted. The various responses of the six member states in the wake of the recent escalation of violence in the conflict serve as proof of such change. However, such patterns also exhibit similarities among the states; they share considerable common ground in their responses due to the GCC's regional identity and security obligations. From a Realist perspective, these shifts and commonalities are largely driven by national interest and the need to secure state survival amidst regional instability. Despite the differing levels of engagement, the responses indicate an increasing involvement of GCC states in the Palestine-Israel conflict as they attempt to navigate new regional orders and alignments to ensure both their security and influence in the changing geopolitical landscape. Realism emphasises that such actions are motivated by pragmatism, as GCC states seek to balance their domestic stability with external threats while simultaneously reshaping alliances that serve their strategic interests.

The GCC states may have a profound political interest in curbing the escalation of violence in the Palestine-Israel conflict and ensuring regional stability in the short-term. However, the responses may also have more profound implications and consequences regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict itself and the regional order in a long-term perspective. The GCC states' interest in the immediate political area may highlight the limits of the US hegemony in the region and the growing desire for rebalancing power and responsibility among regional states (Khan, 2024). Although the outcomes may be quite different for each GCC member, it is most likely that it will result in a more significant role for other regional players, particularly Iran, in shaping the security order of the region.

Regional Stability Dynamics

The resurgence of hostilities between Israel and Palestine presents a significant impediment to regional stability, compelling the GCC states to reassess their diplomatic and strategic frameworks. Saudi Arabia, which had been advancing towards normalisation and emphasised discussions with Israel prior to the outbreak of violence, has suspended these negotiations to emphasise its solidarity with Palestine. This strategic pivot reflects Riyadh's dual obligation to pursue its geopolitical objectives while upholding support for the Palestinian cause, which is integral to its regional influence (Heistinger 2024). In a similar vein, Qatar has amplified its role as a mediator, utilising its established relationships with both Hamas and Israel to advocate for de-escalation. Qatar's involvement in ceasefire negotiations and its provision of financial and humanitarian assistance to Gaza reinforces its status as a vital diplomatic player in the region (Al-Mohannadi 2024).

For the UAE and Bahrain, the recent conflict has prompted discord between their formal policies and the prevailing sentiment of regional solidarity with Palestine. Whilst these nations have advocated for restraint, they must navigate these complexities

carefully to avoid alienating neighbouring Arab states, especially given the predominantly pro-Palestinian public sentiment within the Gulf (Abbas 2024). This precarious balancing act may complicate their diplomatic relations with Israel and could result in a more measured approach to future cooperative initiatives in the immediate future.

Meanwhile, Oman and Kuwait, which maintain pro-Palestinian solid stances, have consistently condemned Israel's actions. Their roles as neutral mediators will likely be reinforced as they emphasise diplomatic solutions over military partnerships (Abbas 2024). Oman may emerge as a more influential facilitator of dialogue between Israel and Arab nations. At the same time, Kuwait is expected to maintain its position as a vocal critic of Israeli policies in international arenas such as the Arab League and the United Nations.

Domestic Implications

The ongoing conflict has generated substantial public sentiment throughout the GCC states, thereby influencing their internal political landscapes. Specifically, in Saudi Arabia, the prevailing pro-Palestinian sentiment among the populace complicates the government's pursuit of normalisation with Israel, as it risks inciting public backlash. Consequently, the Saudi leadership's choice to temporarily suspend normalisation talks serves, in part, to harmonise government actions with public sentiment while striving to maintain its regional power dynamics (Abbas 2024). In the UAE and Bahrain, the events of 7th October have introduced domestic difficulties, particularly concerning their engagement strategies with Israel. The entrenched public sympathy for the Palestinian cause across the Gulf has intensified in response to the conflict, creating a notable divergence between official foreign policies and popular opinion. This disparity could compel these governments to reconsider their diplomatic relationships with Israel, potentially impeding the progress of the Abraham Accords and necessitating a reassessment of their engagements with both Israel and the wider Arab community (Abbas 2024).

In contrast, Qatar's distinctive role as a mediator has allowed it to experience comparatively lower domestic resistance, as its foreign policy largely reflects public sentiment, particularly regarding its support for Gaza and Palestinian organisations. This alignment between Qatar's diplomatic initiatives and public opinion has strengthened the government's legitimacy, positioning it as a significant humanitarian actor (Abbas 2024). Similarly, Oman and Kuwait have garnered considerable domestic support for their unwavering pro-Palestinian positions. In both countries, aligning foreign policies with popular opinion has facilitated a lack of substantial internal dissent, fostered a stable domestic environment while allowed for ongoing diplomatic engagement concerning Palestine (Abbas 2024). The Hamas-Israel conflict significantly disrupts this balance, pushing GCC states towards state-centred models focused on national projects that seek societal alignment yet often lack inclusivity. In this evolving context, competing identities vie for recognition and legitimacy, facilitating inter-societal connections which help mitigate potential domestic political disruptions and support societal cohesion amidst changing dynamics.

Long-Term Geopolitical Consequences

The geopolitical consequences stemming from the conflict that erupted post-7th October are likely to significantly reshape the dynamics of the Gulf region within the larger Middle Eastern framework. For Saudi Arabia, the emergence of this conflict may compel a delay in its initiatives to normalise ties with Israel, as the Kingdom seeks to reaffirm its leadership among Arab states by demonstrating allegiance to Palestine. This strategic pivot could lead to a reorganisation of regional alliances, especially if Saudi Arabia decides to fortify connections with key Arab nations instead of pursuing enhanced relations with Israel. However, Saudi Arabia's long-term aspiration for normalisation may remain if the Israel-Palestine conflict evolves favourably (Buheji et al. 2024).

The conflict has transformed the geopolitical scenario, especially for all members of the GCC. While certain countries are confronted with new challenges in managing their diplomatic ties with Israel, others find themselves well-positioned to reinforce their roles as mediators and advocates for Palestinian rights, thereby shaping the trajectory of Middle Eastern diplomacy. The ongoing adjustments in the GCC states' responses to the Israel-Palestine conflict could have profound geopolitical ramifications both regionally and globally. This shift may symbolise a transition from their former alignment as Western allies towards adopting a more multi-polar approach. Within the Middle Eastern context, influenced by the perception of the West's inability to secure peace and stability, GCC states might increasingly integrate support for Palestinian self-determination into their foreign policies (Buheji et al. 2024). Should peace negotiations stagnate over a certain period, these nations may advocate for Western engagement in funding and overseeing peacekeeping efforts in Jerusalem and other contested religious sites. Furthermore, to avert future escalations, GCC states could champion the presence of international observers to monitor ceasefires established by Israel and secular Palestinian leadership.

External Powers: Russia and China's Strategic Engagement

Beyond the Middle East, Russia and China are likely to deepen their geopolitical influence in the region, particularly within the GCC. Russia, maintaining strong relationships with both Iran and the GCC states, may emerge as a key ally in managing military and energy collaborations. By acting as a supplier of arms and expertise, Russia could enhance Iran's military deterrence capabilities while simultaneously supporting the GCC nations in pursuing civil nuclear programmes. Despite potential Western sanctions, Russia's ability to facilitate alternative payment systems and energy trade positions it as a critical player in shaping the future balance of power in the region (Abbas 2024) (Zeb 2024).

Conversely, China is expected to strengthen its geopolitical leverage by overseeing major energy and infrastructure projects in the GCC. In the event of Western sanctions against the GCC due to military cooperation with Russia, China could step in as a key partner, managing critical energy security and water infrastructure projects. This strategic engagement would further entrench China's influence in the Gulf, positioning it as a

central player in the region's long-term economic development (Zeb 2024).

Summary

The events of 7th October 2023 served as a critical turning point for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, compelling them to reassess their foreign policy approaches amidst escalating violence between Israel and Palestine. This conflict, marked by an unprecedented attack by Hamas and a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, underscored the complex interplay between domestic pressures, regional dynamics, and international relations. Rooted in Realist theory, this study examined how each GCC state prioritised national interests, security concerns, and state survival in their responses to the crisis.

The responses of GCC states revealed a spectrum of diplomatic recalibrations shaped by individual interests and public sentiment. Saudi Arabia halted its normalisation talks with Israel, reflecting a strategic pivot to align with pro-Palestinian sentiment and maintain its leadership within the Arab world. This shift was further demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's proposal at the UN General Assembly advocating for a ceasefire in Gaza, highlighting its role as a mediator amidst the crisis. Meanwhile, the UAE and Bahrain, signatories of the Abraham Accords, adopted cautious stances by balancing their diplomatic and economic ties with Israel against mounting regional and humanitarian concerns. This reserved approach reflects their challenge in maintaining pragmatic relations with Israel while addressing the complexities of the conflict.

Qatar intensified its mediation efforts, leveraging its ties with Hamas to facilitate negotiations and deliver humanitarian aid, thereby cementing its role as a significant regional actor. Oman maintained its neutral stance, focusing on stabilising diplomatic channels and advocating for dialogue to prevent further regional escalation. Kuwait remained steadfast in its pro-Palestinian position, actively condemning Israeli actions and pushing for stronger Arab solidarity. These varied responses highlight the adaptability of GCC states' foreign policies, each balancing public sentiment, geopolitical imperatives, and broader international pressures.

A key finding of this research is the lack of assertive collective action from the GCC as an organisation, which has limited its ability to present a unified front on the Palestine-Israel conflict. This fragmentation reflects the divergent national interests, economic priorities, and geopolitical alliances of its member states. The Abraham Accords further exemplify these divisions, with some states embracing normalisation with Israel, while others remain committed to traditional pro-Palestinian stances. Consequently, the GCC's role has been primarily as a platform for economic and security coordination rather than a cohesive political entity capable of decisive collective action.

The application of Realist theory offered a valuable framework to interpret these dynamics, illustrating how state-centric policies and survival concerns shape individual responses. While a unified GCC stance could have exerted greater diplomatic and economic pressure on Israel and influenced the United States' regional policies, this potential remains unrealised due to internal divisions and the prioritisation of national agendas.

This article contributes to a deeper understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics, highlighting the challenges of achieving GCC unity in addressing complex geopolitical issues. The findings underscore the necessity for individual and collective strategies to balance national interests with regional stability. The next section will provide recommendations to enhance GCC cohesion and effectiveness in addressing the Palestine-Israel conflict, drawing from these insights.

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