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The Status of Wedge Strategy in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Case Study: Persian Gulf Cooperation Council)

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Abstract

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Iran and the southern Persian Gulf states fostered a degree of unofficial alliance, driven by US encouragement and the structural pressures of the Cold War. Nixon's "Twin Pillars" policy, a cornerstone of US Middle East strategy, and the shared threat of communism were key factors in Iran's rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies. This context fostered a balance of threat, with Iran and these monarchies finding common ground against communism and even Arab nationalism.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution dramatically altered the regional power dynamics. The existing balance of threat was shattered, and the primary threat shifted from communism to the revolutionary government in Iran. Deeply concerned about the potential spread of the revolution, the Gulf monarchies established a new balance of

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threat, forming the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on May 25, 1981, to counter Iranian influence.

Given that from the very beginning this council lacked a strong internal cohesion against Iran, the Islamic Republic tried to exploit the gaps in this council to break up or weaken the threatening alliance.

The deteriorating relations within the Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) have presented Iran with a unique opportunity to cultivate stronger political, security, and economic ties with Qatar and Oman. By leveraging these relationships, Iran aims to influence regional dynamics and potentially weaken the PGCC's internal cohesion. A key element of Iran's foreign policy in this context is its "wedge strategy." This paper examines how Iran exploits existing divergences within the PGCC to advance its interests.

This study hypothesizes that Iran employs a combination of internal balancing and a "wedge strategy" to mitigate the threat of the regional alliance. This approach capitalizes on political divisions within the PGCC, both regionally and internationally, to foster cooperation with strategically significant PGCC members.

This descriptive-analytical study employs a library-based research methodology, drawing upon scholarly journals and reputable online sources.

This article employs the theoretical framework of the "wedge strategy," which Initially described by Timothy W. Crawford in his book titled *The Power to Divide*.

The primary goals of a wedge strategy are twofold:

1-Preventing Alliance Formation: Proactively acting to stop potential adversaries from forming a unified front. This is a preemptive approach.

2-Disrupting Existing Alliances: Breaking apart or weakening established alliances that pose a threat. This is a reactive approach.

Successful application of a wedge strategy, as outlined by Crawford, generally requires two key conditions: first, the divider must perceive the target state as a significant or pivotal member of the opposing coalition, whose defection would substantially weaken the alliance; second, the divider must possess the capacity to offer sufficient incentives—whether material (e.g., economic aid, security guarantees) or ideational (e.g., recognition, shared values)—to induce the target state's defection.

Crawford identifies different variants of the wedge strategy. In the reward-based variant, which is particularly relevant to this study, the divider state utilizes positive inducements and persuasion to neutralize potential adversaries, transforming them from opponents into neutral actors or even cooperative partners. This contrasts with other variants, such as punishment-based strate-

gies (using threats or coercion) or exploitation-based strategies (capitalizing on existing tensions within the coalition).

By applying this framework to Iran's relations with Qatar and Oman within the PGCC, this article seeks to analyze how Iran has attempted to exploit divisions within the GCC and create wedges between its members.

To prevent a unified anti-Iranian front within the Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC), Iran has pursued a wedge strategy, seeking to attract friendly states and weaken the bloc. Success in this endeavor could foster cooperation with targeted PGCC members. Qatar needs Iran from two strategic aspects: maintaining access to their shared border, a vulnerability exposed during the 2017 blockade, and balancing against Saudi Arabian hegemony. Consequently, Iran's wedge strategy toward Qatar is primarily reward-based, offering geopolitical space and a counterbalance to Saudi influence.

Iran attempts to exploit the ideological divide between Qatar's affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia's Salafi orientation to advance its regional agenda, particularly concerning Israel. Qatar's response to the normalization agreements between some Arab Gulf states and Israel highlights this tension. Qatar also opposes Saudi-led anti-Iranian policies within the GCC. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani has criticized the GCC and Arab League's anti-Iran stance, accusing them of mirroring Washington's policy rather than prioritizing regional diplomacy. The Emir of Qatar has also explicitly criticized Riyadh's anti-Iran policies and pledged closer ties with Tehran.

Qatar's geographic proximity to both Saudi Arabia, a major arms importer, and Iran, a revolutionary state, necessitates a delicate balancing act in its foreign policy. This balancing act is not a strategic choice but a survival imperative for safeguarding Qatari interests amidst regional instability. However, this strategy has consistently faced opposition from several regional and extra-regional Arab states, including Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which disapprove of Qatar's growing relationship with Iran. Even prior to the 2017 Saudi-led embargo, Qatar maintained a delicate balancing act, carefully avoiding overt hostility towards both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Doha generally refrained from taking sides in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and distanced itself from the strongly anti-Iranian rhetoric of the UAE and Bahrain.

Oman occupies a unique position in Iran's strategy to weaken the Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) due to their robust bilateral relationship. Similar to its approach with Qatar, Iran's strategy toward Oman is primarily reward-based, focusing on security cooperation. Securing the Strait of Hormuz is a paramount

foreign policy objective for Oman, and Omani leaders recognize that strained relations with Iran could jeopardize this crucial waterway. Oman's occasional divergence from the PGCC consensus, stemming from its distinct national identity, historical differences with other members, and deliberate cultivation of ties with Iran, provides opportunities for Iran to exploit existing divisions and further fracture the alliance.

Oman's opposition to Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran policies aligns it more closely with Tehran. Yusuf bin Alawi, in criticizing Saudi Arabia, affirmed that Omani-Iranian relations have been characterized by harmony, friendship, and cooperation since the Iranian Revolution, and that Oman remains unconcerned by disagreements between Tehran and Riyadh.

As a result, since its inception, a primary objective of the Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) has been to counterbalance the perceived threat from Iran. This strategy has encompassed both internal balancing, such as military buildup, and external balancing, including participation in regional and international coalitions and strengthened military ties with the United States. In response, Iran has pursued a strategy of internal counterbalancing, leveraging regional relationships to weaken the PGCC. Historically strong ties with Qatar and Oman have allowed Iran to exploit favorable regional conditions, weakening PGCC unity and preventing a unified Arab consensus against it.

Key words: Wedge strategy, Iran, Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, Qatar, Oman.