

## PAPER DETAILS

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**Analysing the Dynamics of the UK's Growing Relations with the Gulf/Gulf Countries in the Post-Arab Spring from the Neorealist Perspective\***

Arap Baharı Sonrası Birleşik Krallığın Körfez/Körfez Ülkeleri ile Artan İlişkilerindeki Dinamiklerin  
Neorealist Perspektiften Analiz Edilmesi

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**Abstract:** In the post-Arab Spring, the United Kingdom (UK) took significant political, economic, and military steps toward the Gulf/Gulf countries to increase its strength in the region by benefiting from its historical ties and regional dynamics. In this context, it strategically established a military (naval) base in Bahrain and extended its base in Oman to strengthen its military presence in the region. Additionally, after the Brexit decision, the UK approached the Gulf countries, which have immense natural resources, to meet the increasing energy demands, provide energy security and maintain its economic stability. Moreover, the Russia-Ukraine war affected the trade relations of the UK, as well as many European countries, and pushed the UK growingly for rapprochement with the Gulf countries. Interestingly, while making security/military and commercial agreements with Gulf countries, the UK also tried to improve its relations with Iran despite their long-standing political disagreement, which can be analyzed that the UK desired to increase its influence/strength on both sides of the Gulf. Given this background, the systemic challenges/stimuli such as respectively the Arab Spring, the Brexit decision, and the Russia-Ukraine war inevitably forced the UK to maximize its ties with the Gulf countries. This research mainly examines how the systemic stimuli affected the UK's relations with the Gulf region/Gulf countries in the post-Arab Spring from the perspective of the neorealist theory. Above all, it is expected to shed light on political, economic, and military/security relations between the UK and the Gulf/Gulf countries.

**Keywords:** Cooperation, Gulf Countries, Energy Security, Power Politics, Rivalry, The United Kingdom

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**Özet:** Arap Baharı sonrası Birleşik Krallık, tarihsel bağlarını ve bölgesel dinamikleri kullanarak, bölgedeki gücünü artırmak için Körfez/Körfez ülkelerine yönelik önemli siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri adımlar atmıştır. Bu bağlamda, bölgedeki askeri varlığını güçlendirmek için stratejik davranarak Bahreyn'de bir askeri (deniz) üssü kurmuş ve Umman'daki üssünü de genişletmiştir. Ayrıca Brexit kararının ardından Birleşik Krallık, artan enerji talebini karşılamak, enerji güvenliğini sağlamak ve ekonomik istikrarını korumak için zengin doğal kaynaklara sahip Körfez ülkelerine yönelmiştir. Üstelik, Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı, birçok Avrupa ülkesinin yanı sıra İngiltere'nin de ticari ilişkilerini etkilemiş ve İngiltere'yi Körfez ülkeleriyle giderek artan bir yakınlaşmaya itmiştir. İlginç bir şekilde Birleşik Krallık, Körfez ülkeleriyle güvenlik/askeri ve ticari anlaşmalar yaparken, uzun zamandır süre gelen siyasi görüş ayrılıklarına rağmen İran ile de ilişkilerini geliştirmeye çalışmıştır. Bu anlatılanlar göz önüne alındığında, sırasıyla Arap Baharı, Brexit kararı ve Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı gibi sistemik zorlamalar/uyaranlar, İngiltere'yi kaçınılmaz olarak Körfez ülkeleriyle bağlarını güçlendirmeye zorlamıştır. Bu araştırma, temelde sistemik uyarıların Birleşik Krallık'ın Arap Baharı sonrası Körfez bölgesi/Körfez ülkeleriyle ilişkilerini nasıl etkilediğini Yeni-Gerçekçi teori perspektifinden incelemektedir. Bilhassa, bu çalışmanın Birleşik Krallık ile Körfez/Körfez ülkeleri arasındaki siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri/güvenlik ilişkilerine ışık tutması beklenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İşbirliği, Körfez Ülkeleri, Enerji Güvenliği, Güç Politikaları, Rekabet, Birleşik Krallık

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## **1. Introduction**

The Arab Spring uprisings, which were expanded by the self-immolation of a street vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, in 2010 after being beaten by a Tunisian municipal official, destroyed, weakened, and/or threatened long-termed regimes in the Middle East and the Gulf and led the other actors to re-determine their political positions in the region as well as ensuring their security and interests. Theoretically, systemic stimuli force states to respond against it and protect their security and interests. In this context, the United Kingdom (UK) focused on the Gulf region/Gulf countries, which have geopolitical and geoeconomic importance as well as historical ties. Moreover, other stimuli such as its Brexit decision (withdrawal from the European Union/the EU) and the Russia-Ukraine war pushed the UK for rapprochement with the Gulf countries. Thus, the UK tried to develop its military, economic, and political relations with the countries in this region. Moreover, the UK administration paid high-level visits to the Gulf and made official agreements with the Gulf countries based on military, economic, and political relations. More strikingly, London tried to improve its relations with Iran although it generally pursued opposing policies towards the Iranian regime by following pro-US policies for a long time, which indicates that the UK desires to expand its political influence in a wider area in the Gulf region. However, it relatively attempts to re-consolidate its power in the Gulf region. The security control and superiority over the region (mainly in the Middle East) gradually shifted to the US during the Cold War years and the UK backed the US policies within "special relations".<sup>2</sup> More notably, the UK administration backed the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq with its military capabilities (Yüce, 2022, p. 251-253). Given this background, the UK is currently seeking to re-determine its position in the region and expand its sphere of influence after the systemic pressures/stimuli such as the Arab Spring, the Brexit decision, and the Russia-Ukraine war.

This research mainly examines how systemic stimuli such as the Arab Spring, the Brexit decision, and the Russia-Ukraine war affected the UK's relations with the Gulf region/Gulf countries in the post-Arab Spring within the framework of the neorealist theory. Based on primary sources (primarily the UK parliamentary documents) and secondary sources in the existing literature, the UK-Gulf countries' relations are discussed in the research. More specifically, scientific findings are analyzed from the perspective of the neorealist theory, which mainly focuses on system and power politics in the field of International Relations (IR). At this point, the research reveals an interaction between systemic stimuli (independent variable) and political response/s (dependent variable). In other words, it attempts to demonstrate how systemic stimuli (independent variables) affect the UK's responses and relations (dependent variable). After the introduction, which presents the general outline and perspective of the research, in the second part of the research, the theoretical discussion takes place, which explains the basic insights of the neorealist theory with its variants. Thus, it also examines how the neorealists see states and the international system and read the events and phenomena in the context of international relations. The third part gives a brief historical background about the UK and Gulf relations to track the significance of their long-standing ties and correlate with present-day relations. The fourth part broadly discusses the UK's increasing relations with the Gulf countries in the post-Arab Spring (2010-2022). In other words, it is the part in which the core discussion of the research depending on the research question/thesis takes place. In conclusion, the research shares final analyses of the research discussion and predictions about future relations. Against this backdrop, the research is primarily expected to shed light on political, economic, and military/security relations between the UK and the Gulf/Gulf countries and rivalry in the system.

## **2. Neorealism Strikes Back**

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<sup>2</sup> See John Dumbrell. (2006). *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from Cold War to Iraq*. Second Edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

IR theories offer an evident perspective on our understanding of international politics and/or events and phenomena, which in essence help us perceive and analyze the real world through the given theoretical perspective/abstract assumptions. In this context, neorealist theory and its variants made significant assumptions about the analysis of the Cold War period through the international system and power politics of the two rival Great Powers (the US and Soviet Russia/USSR). However, with the end of the Cold War era, the theory faced new challenges with the claim that it had “no longer explanatory power”, which meant that cooperation was effective in understanding and defining the novel realities of world politics in the post-Cold War era rather than security cooperation and conflicts. At this point, John J. Mearsheimer claimed that the characteristics of the realist world and/or the international system did not still change and the states would behave similarly as they used to. Theoretically speaking, the structure of the international system remained almost the same. In the context of characteristics of the international system, firstly the states are main actors in world politics and act in the anarchic international system. Secondly, the great powers own offensive military capabilities. In fact, every individual state owns several offensive military capabilities. Thirdly, states cannot be sure of the others’ hostile intentions. Fourthly, the great powers give higher importance to their survival. Fifthly, states are rational actors who calculate the costs and benefits of their political behaviors as well as planning/implementing survival strategies (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 360-363).

Based on the neorealist (especially offensive realist theory) assumption that survival is the principal motivation of states, states try to maximize their power in order to survive in the system (Synder, 2002, p. 158). In the post-Cold War period, Russia focused on two vital factors, polarity and maximization of its power in the system, to survive and to regain its former power/prestige. Thus, multipolarity was in favor of Russia to increase its power and balance the US threat/dominance in the system. The US was the single dominant actor in the system but theoretically, the dominant power takes more responsibilities in the distant areas, which weakens it for a very long time (Waltz, 2000, p. 28). The military moves/maneuvers of Russia under President Putin’s rule in the post-Arab Spring posed to counterweight the USA, which decided to withdraw its huge military muscle from the Middle East due to the high cost of long-termed war including economic and military losses. Additionally, Russia saw the power vacuum which was created by the withdrawal of the US from the region as an opportunity for its political and military maneuvers in the way that offensive realism highlighted and predicted that states seek to expand their influence in a region of a power vacuum (Labs, 1997, p. 17). More specifically, it challenged to shift the unipolar system by maximizing its relative power. Thus, hard power and power politics became effective in the international system in the post-Arab Spring. In line with this, Russia occupied Crimea in 2014, started military operations in Syria in 2015, then took an active role in Libya in 2019,<sup>3</sup> and finally, in 2021, attempted to invade Ukraine. Given these conflicts and interventions, power politics retained its significant position in the interrelations of the states. Also, states tried to maximize their power as well.

The neorealist theory has regained significant weight in explaining and analyzing interstate relations and systemic pressures/stimuli in the post-Arab Spring due to the retained position of power politics in the international system. It emerged in the late 1970s with Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* to explain the systemic variables and power politics during the Cold War (Waltz, 1979). However, it faced challenges and/or criticism in the realist realm. In this regard, defensive realism and offensive realism as variants of neorealist theory have basic similarities and differences. They mainly believe that states primarily aim to survive in the anarchic international system on their own. However, defensive realism urges that an anarchic system forces the states to gain the power to survive, whereas offensive realism believes that the system forces states to maximize their relative strength and behave aggressively to

<sup>3</sup> For Russian maneuvers to balance the US in the Middle East see Samet Yüce & Philipp O. Amour. (2022). Russia is Back to the Balancing Game. *Gazi Akademik Bakış Dergisi*, 14(28), 43-66.

maximize the prospects of their survival/security. It is strikingly noted that offensive realists favor states' maximization of power at any expense against defensive realists' status quo/maintenance of the balance of power. Additionally, offensive realists assert that states feel unsatisfied and try to benefit from the emerging opportunities in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 20-21).

On the other hand, the increase in the arms race/security dilemma and arms trade (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2022), as well as ongoing conflicts in the world, support the above-mentioned analysis, which neorealist theory has regained weight in explaining the events and phenomena recently. Moreover, the power politics among the rivals have strongly posed to evolve from a single dominant/unbalanced actor to a new polarity in which more than two actors begin to influence the system. Although the US still retains its position as a relatively strongest actor in the system, there are other powers/challengers like Russia and China that are willing to balance the US and/or likely challenge it. However, we should keep in mind that competition in a multipolar system is more complicated than in a bipolar system. At the same time, states are inclined to build alliances against their rivals/hegemon and it is very difficult to predict the strength of these alliance groups (Waltz, 2000, p. 6). Russia and China supported each other in international politics and took a rival position against the US. At this point, China's huge economic and military development appears to be a much greater rival for the US than Russia (Mearsheimer, 2021). Additionally, regarding their latent power and military power, we can prominently count some other powers such as the European Union (EU) including France and Germany, England with a freer hand after the Brexit decision, India with its large population and military capacity, and Japan with its economic power. Above all that, there is no persistent anti-US coalition even though more than twenty years have passed since the end of the Cold War (Yalçın, 2015, p. 219). Considering all these, we can at least determine that the existing international system is much more than unipolar. Instead, the system can be characterized as "emerging multipolarity", which poses a high potential for conflicts and likely increases security/survival-based co-operations among the states.

### **3. Historical Background: The UK's Political Interest and Influence in the Gulf Region (1820-2010)**

Although British hegemony and protection in the Gulf region began with the General Maritime Treaty with Bahrain in 1820, the UK leadership intensively focused on the security of the Gulf region, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.<sup>4</sup> They perceived it as a very strategic asset for their international trade and competition because it was a very vital trade route from their homeland to British India and the Gulf region. They refrained from any rival interference to their regional interests by purchasing the shares of the Canal in 1875. With the discovery and utilization of oil reserves around, the strategic importance of the Gulf increased among the rival powers. The UK dominated the region not only to meet the domestic oil demands but also to ensure further interests in the region, which had economic, political, and military importance for it (Kent, 1994, p. 10-17; Yüce, 2016). Thus, after the First World War, it exploited the Gulf oil and controlled the crossroad of the key sea routes. Then, the regional dynamics after the mid-20th century pushed the UK's administration to change its politics toward the Gulf/Gulf sheikdoms (Onley, 2009; Smith, 2004).<sup>5</sup> The fanned Arab Nationalism and Soviet influence in Egypt and elsewhere in the region increased decolonization and put pressure on its longstanding hegemony in the Middle East and the Gulf Region (Onley, 2009, p. 15-16). At last, it officially withdrew its military muscle from the region in 1971 when the Gulf monarchies such as Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain declared their independence but it maintained its influence on their economic, political, and military mechanism (Bölme

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Şennur Şenel. (2016). 19. Yüzyılda İngiltere'nin Basra Bölgesindeki Faaliyetleri. *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, 9(18).

<sup>5</sup> In the context of regional dynamics see Simon C. Smith. (2004). *Britain's Revival and Fall in the Gulf: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, 1950-71*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon; James Onley. (2009). *Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820-1971: The Politics of Protection*. Center For International And Regional Studies (CIRS), Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, Qatar, 1-44.

& Çavuşoğlu, 2019, p. 14; Stansfield, Stokes, & Kelly, 2018, p. 235-236). Also, it pursued a policy to benefit from the Gulf oil reserves, which contained over %60 of the total global reserves. Theoretically, states (primarily great powers) struggle with each other to be a hegemon in the system, and to be a hegemon in any region in the world should be seen as an ideal position for them (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 42). The USA became one of the dominant powers in the Middle East during the Cold War years. In other words, the security control and superiority over the Gulf region/Gulf countries gradually shifted to the US with the bilateral security commitments and military cooperation deals in the context of the Carter Doctrine. Yet, the UK managed to continue its presence and influence in the Gulf (Çavuşoğlu, 2018, p. 6-10). Also, it supported the US regional policies/security concerns in the Middle East and the Gulf region within “special relations” during and after the Cold War period. More notably, the Blair administration backed the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq with its military capabilities (Yüce, 2022, p. 251-253). In the unipolar post-Cold War, the UK preferred to assume a secondary role in its alliance with the US for international duties. However, the systemic stimuli in the post-Arab Spring forced it to foster its own position in the self-help anarchic system.

#### 4. The Dynamics of the UK's Relations with the Gulf/Gulf Countries (2010-2022)

The Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010, demolished or threatened the long-termed regimes in the Middle East and the Gulf region and pushed the regional and international actors including the UK to re-determine their position in the system and/or increase their influence in the region. The neorealists contend that survival is states’ principal motivation in the self-help anarchic system and when they find an opportunity, they seek to maximize their capabilities/power through economic, diplomatic, and military means in order to survive and avoid being threatened by others in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 34-35). Since the EU countries could not create a common policy regarding the interference in the crises in the Middle East, each country acted in line with its own interests (Altın, 2018, p. 47-49). Thus, the UK Government supported the democratic protests during the Arab Spring through the Arab Partnership Fund, which funds various projects in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (The UK Parliament, 2011). Additionally, the UK leadership perceived the protests/uprisings (particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen) in the region from different perspectives. They backed the military and diplomatic actions against the Gaddafi regime and the Bashar al-Assad regime and pursued less critical and deterrent political behavior to the other three regimes, whereas they avoided any interferences against the Khalifa regime. In the Bahrain case, the UK leadership calculated their long-deemed “friendship” and high politics with the Khalifa regime/Bahrain in their policy decision and accordingly encouraged the regime to implement new reforms in the country rather than a military interference and active condemnation (Leech & Gaskarth, 2015, p. 155-156; Maguire & Vickers, 2013, p. 22-23). Then, it individually exploited its historical ties and regional dynamics to reshape its Gulf relations after the Arab Spring. When states saw an opportunity to maximize their share of regional power they employ strategies and specific goals to achieve their goals (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 167). Thus, the UK endeavored to strengthen its presence in the Gulf region by signing a strategically important military (naval) base in Bahrain in 2014. Then in 2018, the authorities opened the base with an official ceremony (Reuters, 5 April 2018). Additionally, the UK’s military ties with the other Gulf countries such as the UAE, Qatar, and Oman have been bolstered recently as well (Brooke-Holland, 2021, p. 16; Roberts & Almahri, 2021, p. 80-81; Ulrichsen, 2022).

The UK leadership including Theresa May and Boris Johnson embraced “Global Britain” to consolidate domestic politics as well as underscoring the UK’s global role. In other words, the leadership intentionally and strategically attempted to revive the UK’s traditional role in international politics (Johnson, 2016). The UK’s bolstering bilateral economic, political, and military relations with the Gulf countries prove its global ambition to shift its foreign policy behaviors and become a global power in the system (Devanny & Berry,



2021, p. 145-156). At this point, the UK leadership, especially in the post-Brexit era, saw the long-standing UK-Gulf relations as an opportunity to augment its power both in Middle Eastern politics and international politics, which complies with the neorealist theory assumption that states are willing to survive by power maximization in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 20-21). Additionally, the Gulf region was symbolic geography for the UK leadership to implement the idea of Global Britain because their official withdrawal from the region in 1971<sup>6</sup> posed that Britain was a weakened global power in the international system.

In the post-Arab Spring, the UK seized an opportunity to enhance its defence and security commitments with Qatar and the UAE, which were important markets and allies in the Gulf region. Specifically, it actively played a significant role in training the UAE police and military as well as UAE military expenditure (Sharfi, 2018, p. 145). On the other hand, it settled its RAF in al-Udeid Base near Doha and increased its arms sales and military supplies such as 24 Typhoon jets with a deal of six billion GBP in 2017 (Yanigun & Al-Mamari, 2021, p. 130). In return, Qatar and the UAE invested in the UK's key economic fields and provided LPG for the increasing energy need (Qatrjoui, 2022).

The UK attempted to strengthen its strategic position in Oman with security deals and/or military cooperation, which promised and increased the presence of the UK navy forces in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, and the Indian Ocean (The UK Government, 2016a). Thus, the UK Navy officially found an opportunity to navigate the cargo vessels as well as rival military navies' activities around. Also, the UK government (2020, September) made a huge investment of 23.6 million GBP to build a Joint Logistics Support Base at Duqm, which would strategically enlarge the existing UK base at the port. The investment in the port of Duqm had significance for Britain's military deployment because it could accommodate its aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, and back Britain's Army training in Oman. The UK used the port for the largest military exercise known as Exercise Saif Sareea 3 in 2018 with the participation of 65,000 Omani and 5,500 English personnel (The UK Government, 2020; The UK Ministry of Defence, 2019). Then, the UK Defence Secretary signed a key security deal, a new Joint Defence Agreement (JDA), with his Omani counterpart during his diplomatic visit to Oman, which not only provided Britain's commitment to security and stability in Oman but also maximized its power in the Gulf region. More importantly, by quoting the JDA, the UK leadership tried to prove that it became "a truly global Britain" after the withdrawal from the EU (The UK Government, 2019).

Military facilities/bases in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar and security commitments to the Gulf countries enable the UK to extend its power throughout the region (Vagneur-Jones, 2017, p. 5). Thus, it achieved an effective position in the control of the Gulf. The UK Foreign Secretary voiced it as "Britain is back East of Suez" with 1500 troops and 7 warships, which is the second power after the US (The UK Government, 2016c). By mobilizing its navy forces after the 2019 tanker crisis, it proved that the UK was a significant actor in Gulf security and tried to maintain its position in the Gulf (Bashir, 2019). Also, The UK and GCC had a strategic agreement on defence and security as well as other fields such as trade and investments. They committed to act against the threats and safeguard regional security (The UK Government Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2021). The UK's growing military relations with the Gulf countries and its competition with its rivals to gain a better position in the region indicate that it is an important player in the emerging multipolar system as well.

Another stimulus that pushed the United Kingdom to get closer to the Gulf countries was its Brexit decision, which meant leaving the European Union.<sup>7</sup> It has highly affected the UK's relations with other countries including economic agreements. After the Brexit decision, the UK administration had to make

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<sup>6</sup> For the UK's initial decision to withdraw from the Gulf region in 1968 see Simon C. Smith. (2015). Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A Pattern Not a Puzzle. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2015.1123541.

<sup>7</sup> The UK officially withdrew from the EU on 31 January 2020 after tracing the 2016 referendum in the country.

decisions about the British economy on its own. Simply put, the UK needed to find partners/markets to meet its economic needs/demands, especially in the fields of trade and energy (Upadhyay & Siddiqui, 2017). At this point, the Brexit decision forced the UK to develop its economic/commercial relations with the Gulf countries. It also had to compete with other countries in the system. Additionally, the GCC countries (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain) have been significant trading partners for the UK. They are the UK's third-largest non-EU trading partner recently (Loft, 2021). Their bilateral trade reached over 30 billion GBP in 2020 and the UK exports to the GCC were valued at nearly 22 billion GBP (Department for International Trade, 2021; The UK Government, 2021) in the same year. Depending on their bilateral trade it can be analyzed that the UK's policies towards the Gulf after the withdrawal of the EU foster ensuring its economic stability and augmenting its survival strategies. Thus, the UK can further develop good relations with the Gulf countries, especially in the fields of energy and trade. Besides the new free trade agreements (FTAs) with the other partners, the UK initiated preparations for FTA with the GCC countries in 2021 and wanted to progress on it (House of Commons Library, 2022).

Although the UK acts politically on the same axis as the US, it is observed that it has recently behaved differently from the USA in its relations with Iran. To put it more clearly, despite the long-standing political disagreement with Iran and its close military and security relations with the Gulf states, it poses to improve its relations with the Iranian regime. In 2016 the UK appointed an experienced ambassador, Nicholas Hopton, to Tehran after nearly 4 years of the empty post in the British Embassy residence of Tehran, which proves that they wanted to further their relations (The UK Government, 2016b). Also, it paid the Iranian debt for the arms deal in the 1970s. In return, the Iranian regime released two British-Iranian citizens, who were accused of espionage and sent to a prison in Tehran (Mehdi, 2022). While underlining their priorities with Iranian relations, the UK authority tries to improve the bilateral relations with the Iranian regime by leaving the diplomatic channels open in the following citation.

“...engagement should seek to encourage Iran to play a positive, constructive and predictable role as a regional power, which uses international norms, respect for human rights and the rule of law as the basis for its actions. At its heart, a strategy must send a clear message: that Iran's destabilising activities are unacceptable because they adversely impact the region and its peoples, but that when the time comes, the door is open to diplomacy” (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 8 December 2020).

Based on these impacts, it is understandable that the UK desires to increase its sphere of influence in the Gulf, which is very significant for energy geopolitics and security.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the UK wants to develop its relations not only with the countries on the Arabian side of the Gulf but also with Iran, that is, to increase its sphere of influence on both sides of the Gulf. It should be strikingly noted that a UK-Iran rapprochement may create suspicion and fear among the Gulf countries as they traditionally see Iran as a threat/rival in the system. However, it promotes regional security/stability which guarantees the free flow of energy resources as well as the stability of energy prices (Mousavian, 2016, p. 87-91).

The Russia-Ukraine war threatens the countries in the system. The war affects the trade and energy security of the UK, as well as many European countries. That is to say, Russia threatens European countries through oil and natural gas supplies (Horton, Palumbo, & Bowler, 2022). Due to the UK's declining oil and gas reserves, it started to import energy from other suppliers mainly in 2005 (The CIA Factbook, 2022). Additionally, the Russia-Ukraine war creates volatility in oil and gas prices. More significantly, actors and economies are affected by both oil-natural gas supply and price volatility/increase (The World Trade

<sup>8</sup> For global energy geopolitics and energy security see Cenk Sevim. (2012). Küresel Enerji Jeopolitiği ve Enerji Güvenliği. *Journal of Yasar University*, 26(7), 4378-4391.



Organisation (WTO), 2022), which brings the UK closer to the Gulf countries as well. Boris Johnson paid an official visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to reduce the hydrocarbon dependence on Moscow. More strikingly, the UK strengthens its military, economic, and political relations with Gulf countries. On the other hand, it is expected that the Gulf countries, which are economically strong, will meet energy needs and reduce the risk of oil-gas supplies during the war. In this context, the Gulf region, whose political power increased relatively after the Arab Spring, is regaining weight in the system after the Russia-Ukraine war.

## **5. Conclusion**

The system encourages states to run after opportunities for power maximization vis-a-vis their rivals with the endorsement that their principal motivation is to survive in the system as highlighted by the neorealist theory (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29-46). In line with the given assumption, systemic stimuli such as Arab Spring, the Brexit decision, and the Russia-Ukraine war encouraged the UK to re-design its Gulf policy because it desired to strengthen its position in the region and even expand its sphere of influence in the region. Hence, the UK intensively attempted to improve its relations with the Gulf countries including the KSA, Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman by benefiting from its historical ties/legacy and regional dynamics in the post-Arab Spring. It boosted its bilateral military and economic premises in the region with military and economic deals. The buildup of the UK's military facilities and activities in Qatar, the UAE, and Oman proves that the UK desired to regain/maximize its capabilities/power in the Gulf region where its global power gradually waned.

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 40-41) urges that a state seeks to be a global hegemon in the system, which is very rare and almost impossible to achieve. Instead and ideally, it attempts to dominate a region. To this end, the UK focused on the Gulf region, which retains significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance in the context of the security of global trade and energy supplies. Simply put, a dominant state in the Gulf gains superiority over its rivals in the control of the rich hydrocarbon reserves and takes an overwhelming advantage in augmenting its capabilities in the system. However, the traditional hostility among the Gulf Arab countries led by the regional powerhouses, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran, has a great potential to influence energy stability as well as regional stability. Theoretically, states are always suspicious about others' behaviors in the self-help anarchic system so they fear other states even though they are close allies (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 32-33). From this standpoint, the UK's recent diplomatic steps to fix its bilateral relations with Iran, which likely bolsters regional security and stability as well as ensures the free flow of Gulf energy resources and lower energy prices, can damage relations with its Gulf allies because they traditionally see Iran as a threat/rival to the survival of their regimes. Therefore, it should adopt a fine-tuned Gulf policy by navigating security concerns embedded in the region. Also, Brexit and Russia-Ukraine war threatened energy security (hydrocarbon supplies) to European countries including the UK, and created volatility for the energy prices in the global market. The UK tried to reduce such risks and stabilize its energy deficit by furthering its relations with the hydrocarbon-riched Gulf countries through official military and trade agreements.

Last but not least, under its ambitious leadership, who willingly wrestled with the dissents to enhance global ambitions and/or "Global Britain", especially after the Brexit decision, the UK strove for its interests and maximization of its capabilities in the system. However, the US is still the most dominant actor in the system although the other actors such as Russia, China, and England are inclined to maximize their share of regional power and/or world power. On the other hand, the Gulf countries presumably benefit from their bilateral relations with the global actors to leverage their position in the system. More significantly, the Gulf countries can exploit the recent challenges to the energy security/supply for their benefit as they have rich hydrocarbon reserves. Predictably, global actors will further their economic, political, and military relations with Gulf and Gulf countries, which likely enhances the regional and international

competition as well as enjoying novel alliance buildings in accordance with the neorealist analogy of “temporary marriages of convenience”.

### Ethics Statement

No human studies are presented in this manuscript.

### Author Contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor to this work and approves it for publication.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationship that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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