



**INTERNATIONAL
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Máté Szalai

Small States in the Middle East

The Foundations and Application of the Complex

Model of Size

Doctoral dissertation

Supervisor:

László Csicsmann, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

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1. Research history and justification of the topic

I started to work on the Middle East and specifically on the Gulf region in the framework of small state studies during the preparation of my MA thesis. With the supervision of László Csicsmann, I submitted my research in the International Studies Master's program of the Institute of International Studies in 2013 with the focus of interpreting the international behaviour of Qatar using small state foreign policy theories. Since then, I worked on widening my perspective and deepening my knowledge, both in terms of theory as well as the Middle East and the Gulf region. My aim was to exceed the usual framing which is based on the differentiation of the neorealist, neoliberal and/or constructivist perspectives and to reach a common ground for theories related to state size in order to have a more thorough understanding of how smallness effects foreign and security policy and to apply these ideas on the Middle East and the Gulf region.

The relevance of the topic is not self-explanatory. Usual analyses focus on the larger Middle Eastern states – Saudi Arabia, Iran or Turkey – or the global powers interfering in the regional political and economic relations. This phenomenon is not contained to Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region but is a general attribute of the discipline of International Relations (IR) – it is not surprising that Kenneth Waltz himself – the founding father of neorealism – even jokes about those who would build theories on smaller states [Waltz, 1979, 72-73].

Focusing more on small states in the MENA region and in general international relations bears huge importance, at least for three reasons. First of all, with exaggerating the importance of material size in world politics, scholars have built up a cognitive cage for themselves in which they fail to identify and

properly analyse the behaviour and the impact of small states in the international system. Second, by the 21st century, the traditional constraints put on small states have been significantly eased due to systemic processes like globalization, the institutionalisation of world politics, and the emergence of complex interdependences. Third, in the Middle Eastern context, the post-2011 regional environment usually described as *competitive multipolarity/heteropolarity* [Kausch, 2014], in which power is more diffused than ever among the actors of international politics. In this context, the leverage of smaller and medium-sized states such as Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates has grown significantly.

Therefore the aim of the dissertation was to establish a *complex model of size* (CMS) which 1) excludes every theoretically unproven but automatically accepted view of the importance of material capacities, 2) builds upon the relevant thoughts and theories related to size and smallness, 3) provides a widely applicable theoretical and methodological framework to investigate the role of size and small states in international relations, and 4) leads to new scientific results.

After setting up the theoretical background and the methodological framework of the CMS, I applied its notions on the Middle Eastern region and its small states. I focused my attention on the four small Gulf states, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar.

The dissertation is the outcome of five years of research. Since 2013, I tried to use diverse methods to deepen my understanding of both small state theory and the Gulf region. First, I have taught various courses at the Corvinus University of Budapest (first in the Doctoral Programme then as an assistant lecturer since 2017) including Small State Studies and Middle Eastern Political Systems, which helped me share my ideas with students and collect their feedbacks. Such discussions have been extremely valuable in developing a coherent understanding of the topic.

Second, I tried to take part in the international academic life – between 2013 and 2015, I developed joint research projects in the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade focusing on the relations between the Middle East and the Visegrad countries. In 2016 and 2017, I participated in the Gulf Research Meeting in Cambridge to present two of my papers (both of which got published later). Since 2015, I participate in the Horizon 2020 project entitled Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA), in the framework of which I conducted research on the embeddedness of the region in the global political and economic system, the role of international non-governmental organizations, and the Qatari crisis.

Third, I conducted several research trips to the region – since 2013, I managed to visit Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey. In 2018, I also visited the United States, where I have met with researchers, governmental and NGO partners working in the Middle East. During these trips, I did not only inquire about the affairs of the MENA region but also tried to collect as many perspectives on state size as possible.

Fourth, I have tried to play an active role in the Hungarian academic life as a teacher of the Corvinus University of Budapest and as a researcher of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade and participated in several conferences, workshops and contributed to joint publications with institutions like the Strategic Defence Research Centre, the Antall József Knowledge Centre, or the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Last but definitely not least, I tried to work close and learn from the prominent scholars of IR theory and the Middle East in Hungary, especially László Csicsmann, Erzsébet N. Rózsa, Anita Szűcs, László Kiss J., Péter Marton, Péter Tóth and Péter Wagner.

2. Methodology

I organised my research on the basis of two hypotheses:

H1: A single model (i.e. the complex model of size - CMS) can be set up on the basis of previous theories related to size and smallness which excludes the researcher bias towards largeness.

H2: The complex model of size provides a widely applicable methodology which leads us to scientific novelties in the research of international relations.

The main method used in the dissertation was formal modelling [Snidal 2002].

I set up the complex model of size in order to interpret the process in which size effects political outcomes. The CMS has been based on two general ideas:

1. The differentiation between four kinds of size: on the basis of the overview of small state literature, one can differentiate between four different conceptualisation of state size (and, consequently, four types of small states), all of which can be interpreted using the materialist-idealist and the structuralist-individualist dichotomies:¹

- *Relative size* (materialist structuralism) refers to the amount of the “general aggregate resources” (GARs –territory, population, economic and military capacities) available to the state in the context of the general distribution of such resources in a given international system.
- *Absolute size* (materialist individualism) is about the availability of such resources in the domestic context of a state in comparison with an “ideal size” for the survival of the given state;
- *Perceptual size* (idealist individualism) refers to the size and strength of the state perceived by either the state elites or the society.

¹ A separation used by seminal pieces of literature of the constructivist IR theory [Wendt, 1999, 22-39; Jepperson – Wendt – Katzenstein, 1996, 36-42].

- *Normative size* (idealist structuralism) is a result of interstate interactions. It refers to the perceived size and importance of the given state in the international community.

2. *The contextual analysis of the effects of size.* Building on the logic of Peter Katzenstein [1985, 136-137], the CMS does not consider size as a “master variable” whose importance outgrows the relevance of any other aspects. Size interacts with other variables, let that be the extreme scarcity or multitude of a given resource, social homogeneity, aspects of regime security, the political system, etc. In order to understand how size effects political outcomes, one has to analyse these interactions between size and other variables on the one hand, and the different types of size on the other.

In the framework of the complex model of size, I used different methods to determine the different types of size of Middle Eastern states:

- to determine relative size, statistical comparison was conducted to see which Middle East states have lower than the average in all four general aggregate resources;
- to investigate normative size, the GDELT database was used to determine the intensity of interstate relations in different relations, building on the assumption that if a state is considered to be larger, the interactions with that state will be more intense;
- to analyse absolute size, I turned to the interactions between territorial, demographic, economic and military smallness and other variables to see whether the state compensates for negative consequences of small size or not;
- to set the perceptual size, speech acts made by the representatives of the small states were analysed in the United Nations Security Council, and a few reliable surveys were presented as well.

After the determination of the size of Middle Eastern states and the most important systemic and individual, material and immaterial variables which affect the way in which size shapes political outcomes, I turned to the investigation of the foreign and security policy behaviour of the small Gulf states. I have chosen five case studies, all of which connected a specific situation with a theoretical question. These include:

- the talks on a possible Gulf union after the independence of Gulf states in the 1970s;
- the threat perception of small Gulf states after the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 and during the first Gulf war between Iran and Iraq;
- the changing alliance policy of the small Gulf states as a result of the second (1990-1991) and the third (2003) Gulf wars;
- domestic and foreign policy behaviour during the Arab Uprisings and regime stability;
- the Gulf rift of 2017 and the Qatari survival strategy (the “multi-track approach”).

The methodological steps of the dissertation are summarised in a systemic way on Chart 1.

Chart 1: The methodological steps of the complex model of size

Steps	Level of analysis	Specific methods
1. Analysing the distribution of GARs and identify relative small states	Systemic material	Statistical comparison
2. Analysing the material systemic variables of the regional environment	Systemic material	Interpretative neorealist and neoliberal methods
3. Analysing the immaterial systemic variables of the regional environment and identify the normative size of states	Systemic idealist	Interpretative English School methods and statistical comparison
4. Analysis of domestic material factors and identify the absolute size of states	Individualist material	Traditional interpretative methods, statistical comparison
5. Analysis of domestic immaterial factors and identify the perceptual size of states	Individual idealist	Traditional interpretative IR methods , discourse analysis and surveys
6. Selection of case studies for social interactions on the state level	Event	Case study selection
7. The analysis of the behaviour of small Gulf states	Event, individual and systemic	Interpretative IR and FPA methods

3. The main findings of the research

3.1. Findings regarding the relative and normative size of Middle Eastern states

- Today there are six relative small states in the Middle East which have smaller territory, population, economic and military capacities than the regional average: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar (the Gulf cluster) as well as Jordan and Lebanon (the Mashreq cluster). They rely more on trade, they are more urbanised, have a higher HDI value than larger states, but do not have a more homogeneous society.
- The normative size of states (namely their perceived importance in the international community) correlates with, though does not equal to their relative material size. While Gulf states normatively outgrew the Mashreq cluster, Jordan and Lebanon are still considered more important as more governments express confrontation or cooperation with them.
- While Qatar and Bahrain have grown normatively since 1979, other complex small states have shrunk or stagnated. Data suggests that these tendencies are more to do with international developments and foreign policy strategies than actual size.
- Hostility towards Middle Eastern small states is lower than towards larger states. Lebanon has the worst image among them, while Oman has the best.

3.2. Findings regarding the systemic environment of small states of the Middle East.

- In general, the Middle East is not as unfavourable for small states as one could assume at first glance. It is true that under-

institutionalisation and lacking integration into the global political and economic system deprives shelter for small states, but other aspects can compensate for this loss to some extent.

- The nature of the “Middle Eastern state”, the emergence of the regime-based institutional framework turns the focus of states to domestic and not foreign threats. This process effects small and large states alike, equalling their security situation to some extent.
- The dominance of intra-state and transnational conflicts over traditional inter-state ones and the strategy of omni-balancing makes it harder for larger states to engage in an armed conflicts with smaller and weaker entities.
- The weakness of states and the diffusion of NGO enlarges the leverage of small states vis-à-vis larger ones.
- The evolution of the balance of power in the region was beneficial for small states in the Mashreq over time and harmful for those in the Gulf until 2011. After that, unpredictability effected small and large state in a similar way, creating an environment with lower level of security coupled with wider potential leverage.
- The normative dichotomy in Middle Eastern political culture and the supra-state group identities (Arabism, Islam, etc.) can serve as a security shelter for smaller states (if they are accepted into the club like the Arab League) but also as a tool in interstate rivalry.
- The normative prohibition of interstate conflicts in the Arab family deprived larger states of their most effective coercive tool against smaller and weaker entities. This prohibition survived until the 1990-1991 Iraqi-Kuwaiti war.
- The practice of intervening in each other’s domestic affairs made social cohesion as the primary line of defence for small states, while

also contributed to the securitisation of social heterogeneity which seemed to be the most vulnerable point for each state, including small ones.

- The process of normative fragmentation and sub-regionalism since the 1980s which was beneficial for small Gulf states but – due to the lack of a common geopolitical identity – disenfranchised the small Mashreq states.

3.3. Findings regarding the variables interacting with different types of smallness in the small Gulf states

- Territorial size interacts with the climatic environment and geopolitical circumstances which deprives small Gulf states from arable land and exposes them to Saudi, Iranian and/or Iraqi influence;
- Demographic size interacts with small territory, the imbalance between the demand and supply in the domestic labour market and social heterogeneity. Interestingly enough, demographic size also interacts with a compensatory policy to tackle demographic smallness, namely labour import. The interplay of these variables results in, among others, high level of population density and urbanization, the need for external labour, the perception of cultural invasion, the emergence of ethnocracies;
- Economic size interacts with large amount of hydrocarbon resources and demographic smallness. These led to rentierism and huge fiscal leverage for many of the small Gulf states;
- Military smallness interacts with huge hydrocarbon resources (depriving small Gulf states of the ability to relative deterrence), systemic developments (urging small Gulf states to build up their own military defence capabilities), and also with the alliance-policy of

small Gulf states as a compensatory policy (creating new kinds of alliance dilemmas).

3.4. Findings regarding absolute size, perceptual size and regime security among the small Gulf states

- The interaction of absolute size, perceptual size and regime security is responsible for the markedly different behaviour of the small Gulf states.
- In the framework of absolute size, all four Gulf state are small in terms of territory, population and military, as the governments tried to introduce compensatory policies to tackle disadvantages in these fields. When it comes to economic capabilities, the small Gulf states should not be considered small in the absolute sense. Demographic and military smallness is the most pressing for the small Gulf states as there are the two dimensions which interact with the most variables, causing structural dependencies.
- Tackling the negative consequences of absolute smallness, Bahrain exposed itself to Saudi influence and managed its domestic problems arising from social heterogeneity by forceful measures and neutralizing Sunni migrant workers. Oman was able to develop its agricultural policy, build up the larger army among the small Gulf states and chose to deepen security relations with Great Britain and was a front-runner in cooperating with the United States. Due to its particular domestic politics, Kuwait turned inside and was forced to institutionalise power sharing among the rival elite groups; while Qatar specialised on natural gas and invited the Muslim Brotherhood to help in state-building.
- When it comes to perceptual size, the investigation showed that despite the logical assumption that all small Gulf states perceive

themselves small (due to their large neighbours and the minority status of the national community), this is not unequivocally seen in the diplomatic discourse of these states. Kuwait showed the most visible presence of smallness in the national identity, partly (but not completely) triggered by the Iraqi invasion. Qatar does not connect the size of resources to the question of international peace and stability, which means that even if they see themselves as small, that does not limit their perception of their abilities. Bahrain concentrates more on cultural heterogeneity and multiculturalism as a source of identity and conflict. Smallness plays (or played) a role in the self-perception of Oman, but not necessarily as a limitation but more as a fact of life, as bigger importance is given to cultural, moral and ethical questions.

- In terms of regime security, the Qatari state elites have the most stable position with lacking formidable opposition networks. The most important challenge for Qatar could be possible intra-regime strife. The Omani leading elite is also relatively safe since the defeat of the rebel movements in the 1970s, though the security apparatus cracked down on opposition networks many times. The weak point of the Omani regime is its highly personalised nature. The situation of the Bahraini and Kuwaiti regime is more complicated. In both cases, we can clearly see intra-regime competition, and also the domestic heterogeneity in the two countries is many times mismanaged by the governments.

3.5. Findings regarding the foreign and security policy behaviour of the small Gulf states

- The debates about Gulf unity in the 1970s indicated that when discussing a possible federation between them, the attitudes of the

small Gulf states were shaped more by their relative size to each other than by their relative size compared to Saudi Arabia and Iran. This notion underlines the point in the CMS that relative size is a regionally determined attribute, therefore its effects are dependent on how the state identifies its position in a narrower or larger region.

- Due to relative military smallness, the small Gulf states tended to overemphasize military threats over political or domestic threats during the Iranian-Iraqi war, which led to sub-optimal decisions and miscalculations in foreign policy. Siding with Iraq in the Iraqi-Iranian war can be seen retrospectively as a bad decision from Kuwait (and also from Bahrain), which did not better their security environment. Coupled with domestic pressure on the Shia networks, this strategy actually led to less safety. On the other hand, Oman and Qatar tried to be as neutral as possible, generally due to their more remote location, better relations with pre-revolutionary Iran, and less domestic turbulence caused by the war.
- The effects of the second and third Gulf crisis showed that the level of cooperation with the US was dependent on the evaluation of the American defence capabilities in terms of both military and political threats. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, small Gulf states were willing to sacrifice their autonomy for security, while after 2003, their priorities diverged, which was in line with systemic changes and the emergence of comparative heterogeneity. Kuwait and Bahrain, whose perceptual size was smaller than that of Qatar and Oman, prioritised security over influence or autonomy, while the Thani regime chose an active strategy, whereas the Bu Said regime preferred active neutrality.
- The events of the Arab Uprisings showed that by the 2010s, the foreign policy possibilities of the small Gulf states were not primarily

limited by the size of the states but more by the level of social heterogeneity. Mismanaged diversity in Bahrain and Kuwait severely decreased their leverage, while Oman and Qatar enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to political outcomes in the region.

- The Gulf rift of 2017 supports the assumption that large normative size can be beneficial and disadvantageous for small states. The active foreign policy of Qatar turned its neighbours against it. On the other hand, it also secured Qatari survival by the previous diversification of security relations. The Gulf rift also shows that by the 2010s, if a small state is able to bring a rivalry to the dimension of soft power, its vulnerability can be reduced significantly.
- The case studies proved that neorealism, neoliberalism and constructivism individually cannot interpret the small Gulf states' foreign and security policy in a comprehensive way.

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