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Foreign Policy Behaviors of Rentier States: In the Context of Iran

By

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Abstract

As is seen geopolitical motives are the main source of interest behind the active political, military and cultural activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran to expand its sphere of influence from the Middle East to the Caucasus, from Central Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa, from Latin America to the South East Asian Region. The billions of dollars of military resources that Iran has transferred, especially to Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and other regions assumed within its sphere of influence, show that costly foreign policy is a conscious choice for the Islamic Regime. In addition, it is clear that this costly foreign policy choice does not bring any significant benefit to the Islamic Regime in terms of political economy. It is known that inflation rates are over 40% and unemployment figures are more than 10% in Iran, which is in a serious economic bottleneck with the effect of economic embargoes along with its costly foreign policy choice. Also, it is seen that the Islamic Regime has not been able to use the extraordinary natural resources of the country efficiently and in a way that will provide welfare to society in general. In this article, an analysis will be executed on the “rentier state” concept to explain the reason, motivation, and ambitions behind Iran’s strong operational capacity in the Middle East, which is in a serious economic bottleneck with the impact of economic embargoes. Thus, the question of whether or how effective the “rentier state” system is in Iran’s unique foreign policy preferences, which are shaped in line with geopolitical motives, will be focused on. Finally, by emphasizing whether the Iranian regime fits this definition or not, an answer will be sought to the question of how adequate the use of this concept is to describe the Iranian state and foreign policy system.

Introduction

This study will focus on whether or how effective the “rentier state” system is in the foreign policy preferences of the Islamic Regime, and whether the Iranian government style fits this definition and an investigation will be conducted that the question of how well this concept is used to describe the Iranian state and foreign policy system is on the question. For this, first of all, the studies of different authors who have made conceptualization studies on this definition since the 1970s, when the theory of the “rentier state” emerged, will be mentioned. It will be mentioned how these writers, who are described as the first, second and third generation, put the “rentier state” in a framework and which features come to the fore in defining this concept. Then, it will be focused on which types of states fit this definition, and finally, the question of how adequate the use of this concept is to describe the Iranian state and foreign policy system will be sought. In this part of the study, the similarities and differences between Iran’s regime systems, which are described as “rentier states”, and their foreign policy activities will be discussed from a comparative perspective. Thus, as a result of a comparative evaluation of the “rentier state” system in the Iranian context and other countries, the question of how effective this system is in Iran’s interventionist and costly foreign policy choices to expand its sphere of influence in different geographies will be answered.

Review of Literature

Sousan Badiei and Cyrus Bina (2002), who has studied the field, argue that many oil-producing states in the Middle East, including Iran, have the property of rentier and that the state itself creates the rentier. The authors state that oil exports constitute the lion's share of Iran’s international trade and constitute the main source of the country’s foreign exchange income. Emphasizing that the Islamic government has completely neglected its capital formation task, Badiei and Bina argue that Iran instead, perhaps deliberately, pursues a myopic policy of (short-term) consumption expenditure. Gholamali Zavarzadeh argues that rentier revenues from oil are the main factor of internationalism and idealism in Iran's foreign policy and it moves this country away from isolationism, economism and realism (Zavarzadeh et al, 2016). Zavarzadeh emphasizes that when Iran's economic data from 1978 to 2013 are analyzed, together with the increasing oil revenues, governments tend towards internationalism and realism in their foreign policy orientations. Thus, the author states that in every period, it has emerged that government leaders have gained international prestige in terms of economics depending on their orientation. Ahmet T. Kuru (2014) emphasizes that the rentier state model also explains why some countries with high per capita GNP may remain politically authoritarian. In addition, the author states that the flow of foreign capital through rentier exports inflates the GNP in these countries before the country reaches a certain level of industrialization. Mohsen Askari Jahaghi (2019) states that oil is the most important and at the same time powerful political-economic commodity in today's world. In this sense, the author argues that oil, as an effective source of economic and political power, has consistently played an important role for Iranian governments and economic powers, both before and after the revolution. However, Jahaghi argues that historical experience in Iran shows that having abundant oil resources and income has no significant relationship with welfare facilities or being a welfare state, and argues that governments have always deprived the country of a democratic state by creating certain rent-seeking networks.

Method of Study

This study will be focused on whether or how effective the “rentier state” system is in Iran’s unique foreign policy preferences, which are shaped in line with geopolitical motives, and whether the Iranian government style fits this definition. For this, first of all, the studies of different authors who have been working on the conceptualization of this definition since the 1970s, when the theory of the ‘rentee state’ emerged, will be discussed methodologically. It will be mentioned how these writers, who are described as the first, second and third generation, put the ‘rentier state’ in a framework and which features come to the fore in defining this concept. Then, a comparative analysis will be made of the foreign policy preferences of Iran and the countries that can be defined as rentier states, where a large part of the country's income is based on oil exports. The similarities and differences with Iran in the foreign policy preferences of these rentier states, which are specified in Table 1 and Table 2 and divided into two groups, will be presented with a comparative perspective. Finally, as a result of a comparative evaluation of the concept of the ‘rentier state’ in the Iranian context and other countries, the question of whether the "rentier state" system in Iran's foreign policy preferences is effective in choosing such an intrusive and costly foreign policy will be answered and certain findings will be reached.

Reseult and Discussion

An Evaluation on the Definition of Rentier State

Hossein Mahdavy, in order to explain the economic, political and social consequences of the exploitation of state revenues of the Pahlavi Dynasty by a dominant group and its components, coined the term “rentier state” in the 1970s. Connecting the formation conditions of the rentier state to the export of the natural resources existing within its borders to foreign markets and the exploitation of the income obtained from it by the dominant group and its components, Mahdavy argues that such political organizations do not have an independent economic enterprise and a healthy taxation system. All segments of the society can get a share of increasing welfare and income from this commercial interaction, which occurs as a result of the sale of the country's natural resources to the foreign market. Stating that it is difficult for the social segment, which exists in such a political organization model without autonomous economic initiatives and taxation mechanisms, to claim any economic, political and social rights against the state, Mahdavy claims that civil society, which has an important place in the liberation process, cannot develop in such an environment. In this way, Mahdavy emphasizes that in an environment without independent economic initiative, a healthy tax system and civil society, a Western-style state and society structuring cannot be built. Mahdavy states that in such societies, a “random” state apparatus emerged as a result of the political regimes distributing the state revenues among the producers as they wished and in line with their own interests. Mahdavy argues that in this case, the free society will be replaced by the docile citizen, and the liberal economic state system will be replaced by the rentier state system.[1]

Another writer who studied and contributed to the concept of the rentier state in the 1980s is Jacques Delacroix. Jacques Delacroix, who focused on why the rentier state system emerged instead of a Western-type state system in the aforementioned societies, used the definition of “distributive state” by bringing a new definition to the rentier state model. Delacroix, who argues that there is no class exploitation in the classical sense in the oil-rich authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, argues that, unlike those who defend the liberal theory, the most important reason for the effective bureaucratic structure in such countries is the high level of representation powers within the state. Emphasizing that the structural conditions in oil-rich countries force the societies in these geographies to accept the existence of the rentier state, Delacroix states that for this reason, just like Mahdavy, it is not possible to talk about a civil society structure that can claim rights on any issue to the regimes.[2]

The authors who conducted research on the rentier state in the period after the 1980s focused on the question of how the rent system, which occurs in such state structures, affects the formation process of political regimes. The continuity of income in rent-based economic structures is suggested as the reason for the longevity of these regimes. Giacomo Luciani is one of these school writers who analyze the concept of a rentier state through Arab countries. Luciani used the concept of “allocation state” instead of the concept of rentier state and divided the states into two “allocation and production states”. Evaluating oil-rich Arab countries in the “allocation state” category, Luciani states that the revenues obtained from oil sales in these states directly affect the formation of political regime types in those countries. Emphasizing that in which areas and in what kind the revenues of the states are used is at

[1] Engin Sune ve Ali Murat Özdemir , “Rantçı Devlet Yazını Üzerine Deneme”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol.9, No: 35, 2012, p.6-7.
[2] **Ibid**., p.8-9.

least as important as these revenues, Luciani claims that the relationship between "income-expenditure" is vitally important.[3]

Luciani defines rentier or allocation states as states that derive their general economic income from oil and other natural resources. Stating that some elements of democracy may be partially visible in such states, Luciani states that this is not an effective nuance in legitimizing these regimes. Luciani, who argues that the incomes of the society in production states are based on non-state resources, argues that, unlike in allocation states, there is an economic policy based on tax revenues in these countries. Luciani places countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain at the centre of his definition of the rentier state in his analysis.[4]

Stating that the economic system is built on the distribution mechanism in rentier state structures, Luciani emphasizes that even if there is an unequal distribution of the income obtained from foreign sales between the dominant powers and other segments of the society, all segments of the society can get a share of this income and welfare. For this reason, this prosperity spreading throughout the society complicates any social objection and resistance against the political regimes of the countries. In case of any objection or resistance against the regime, increasing the income sources further removes the possible threats to the regime. Luciani claims that even in a possible change of power, the opposition that took over the political regime cannot be more democratic than the previous regime and the policies implemented will be limited within the framework of the rentier system.[5]

Another writer, Hazem Beblawi, who emphasizes that the basic income of the state is based on oil sales and that all this capital income is managed by a small manager who holds the state administration, as the definition of a "rentier state", has placed the Arab states in the centre of his work. Emphasizing that this capital income has nothing to do with production, Beblawi made the most important contribution to the literature with the concept of "rentier mentality". Beblawi, after characterizing the main features of the rentier state, states that this type of economy creates a certain mentality – the rentier mentality. Beblawi shows that the most important feature that distinguishes the rentier mentality from traditional economic behaviour is its lack of a Western-type work-compromise system. Beblawi argues that the determination of the conditions that determine the income distribution in such states by a small elite prevents the formation of freedom and citizenship consciousness, causes the development of work ethic and the emergence of an accidental wealth. Emphasizing that there is a hierarchical order in such rent-based economic structures and in such an order, the ruling elite, family members and influential tribes are at the top of this hierarchical structure, Beblawi states that in these management models, in most Arab countries, civil society and a questioning citizen profile cannot be mentioned.[6]

Expressing the oil-rich Arab countries as the best examples of rentier states, Beblawi states that oil constitutes the most important part of the budget and export revenues of such countries. Defining such countries as "multilayered rentier states", Beblawi placed the richest countries of the Gulf such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab States at the centre of this definition. Beblawi also contributed to the literature with the concept of non-oil

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[3] **Ibid.**, p.27.
[4] **Ibid.**, p. 29.
[5] **Ibid.**, p.30-31.
[6] Hazem Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World", **Pluto Journals**, Vol.9, No:4, 1987, p.385-386.

rich "semi-rentier states" and chose states such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Yemen as sample countries to explain this definition.[7]

Jill Crystal is one of the authors who put forward the argument of how oil revenues affect the formation process of the management style. Crystal, stating in the examples of Kuwait and Qatar, the thesis that oil-based revenues are effective in the emergence of the new state mechanism, emphasizes that as a result of the reconciliation between the elite classes in these two countries, the Emirs, who hold the political power, assume the role of distributor in the reflection of state revenues to the society in general. Like the other authors mentioned above, Crystal argues that in return for all this prosperity, there is no political claim to political power and no tendency to change power in society, including the elite class.[8]

Kiren Aziz Chadudhry, who is one of the third generation writers and who makes such studies on the rentier state theory, emphasized that political freedoms are an important factor in the development of states, as well as economic freedoms, in his comparative analysis on Iran and Saudi Arabia. The author cited the failure of the same reforms in the field of political liberalization as the most important reason for the failure of the economic liberalization policies of Iraq and Saudi Arabia in the 1990s.[9]

Gwenn Okruhlik, another third-generation rentier state theorist, makes a different contribution to the literature and argues that, unlike the first and second-generation writers, the welfare stemming from oil revenues is not sufficient for political stability. Unlike other writers, Okruhlik argues that the equal distribution of rents is important, otherwise, there may be oppositional movements. It is stated by the author that oil revenues should be seen as an important element that will reveal opposition movements in case of a possible unequal distribution, rather than being a means of pressure for the political regimes that hold the administration of the country. Therefore, Okruhlik emphasizes that oil revenues can provide important advantages for the opposition as well as for the government.[10]

As a result, it is seen that the common idea of all the theorists who make definitions of the rentier state above and are known as the first -Hossein Mahdavy, Jacques Delacroix and second-Giacomo Luciani, Hazem Beblawi and Jill Crystal-generation authors in the literature on the "rentier state" is that a large part of the budget and export revenues consists of oil sales and the main actor in the distribution of these revenues is the ruling class. In addition, it is stated by all these authors that the economies of such states are not production economies in the classical sense, state revenues are distributed even if not equally to all segments of society, welfare is in question, education, health, employment and accommodation opportunities are provided, and political participation and demands cannot be mentioned. In addition, first and second-generation writers argue that oil sales and subsequent huge incomes are vital in shaping the forms of government in countries where natural wealth is so great. Since the 1990s, writers have emerged who have brought new approaches to the concept of the rentier state. While these authors generally agree with the ideas of first and second-generation writers, they have conducted analyzes of institutional similarities in all rentier states and have worked on explaining political differences in these regimes.

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[7] **Ibid.,** p.391-392.
[8] Jill Crystal, "Coalitions in Oil Monarchies: Kuwait and Qatar", **Comparative Politics**, Vol.21, No:4, 1989, p. 429.
[9] Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, "Economic Liberalization and the Lineages of the Rentier State", **Comparative Politics**, Vol.27, No: 1, 1994, p.5-6.
[10] Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States", **Comparative Politics**, Vol.31, No.3, 1999, p.299-300.

Foreign Policy and Rentier State Context

It is seen that the Gulf countries are generally placed at the centre of all the definitions made above on the rentier state. The most important reason for this is that these countries are rich in oil and natural gas, this wealth is reflected by the ruling elite of the country to all segments of the society as a "distributor function", and the country's economy consists of a distribution economy based on rent rather than production. Thus, it has been determined that wealth and prosperity in these countries are not due to economic liberalization and is provided by an income network obtained from foreign sales (Schwarz, 2008). After the above evaluations, it emerges that these countries, which lack economic liberalization as well as political liberalization, are open to foreign economic relations, attach importance to foreign direct investments, and have stability and mutually beneficial political relations with the Western geography. However, it is one of the most important results that emerged after the analysis that 2 of the 8 countries of the Gulf do not agree with all the arguments used to define the "rentier state". One of these countries is Iran and the other is Iraq.

Table 1: *Table showing GDP, Income Distribution and Export Information in Gulf Countries Considered as Rentier States (2021).*

Name of Country	**GDP**	**Per Capita Income**	**Country Population**	**Export**	**Share of Oil and Natural Gas in Exports**	**Percentage of Oil Rent in GDP (2019)**
Saudi Arabia	805 Billion Dollars	48.000 USD	35 Million	261 Billion Dollars	202 Billion Dollars	%24.4
Qatar	166 Billion Dollars	59.000 USD	2.8 Million	51 Billion Dollars	42 Billion Dollars	%16.91
Kuwait	127 Billion Dollars	25.000 USD	5 Million	42 Billion Dollars	38 Billion Dollars	%42.14
United Arab Emirates	402 Billion Dollars	35.000 USD	11.4 Million	389 Billion Dollars	75 Billion Dollars	%16.19
Bahrain	37 Billion Dollars	24.300 USD	1.54 Million	7.9 Billion Dollars	2.4 Billion Dollars	%3
Oman	74 Billion Dollars	16.000 USD	4.57 Million	31 Billion Dollars	22.5 Billion Dollars	%24.88
Iran	682 Billion Dollars	8.000 USD	85 Million	69 Billion Dollars	37 Billion Dollars	%20.5
Iraq	190 Billion Dollars	4.600 USD	41 Million	63 Billion Dollars	54 Billion Dollars	%39.7

Source: *IMF, (Accessed)* https://www.imf.org/, *OPEC, (Accessed)* https://www.opec.org/, *ITC (Accessed)* https://www.intracen.org/, 4 September 2021.

The issue on which all authors working on the rentier state agree is that such states are not states of production and that the natural wealth of the country is distributed throughout the country by the ruling elite. Despite the fact that the ruling elite, which fulfils this distributive function, is at the top of the income hierarchy in the country, there is wealth and income that spreads throughout the society. Thanks to the “consensus” on the income level, there is relative political stability in such countries. In this sense, we can evaluate the Iranian economy in the category of a rentier state where a significant part of its budget revenues and exports depend on oil and natural gas revenues (Schwarz, 2007). The administration, which seized power after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, built its power on the distribution of the country’s revenues from a single centre. These power centres, which are at the top of the state management hierarchy, hold the mission of distributing the country’s incomes with the huge financial networks they have established (Waldner, 2014). All these features show that the administrative system in the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the best examples of the rentier state wheel.

Possible to evaluate Iran in the category of the rentier state together with other Gulf countries in terms of the that a large part of the budget and export revenues are obtained from the sale of natural resources, and that it has a distribution economy instead of a production economy, and that the revenues from the sale of natural resources are reflected in the society by the ruling elite who hold the administration of the country. However, the most basic feature that distinguishes Iran from these countries is its failure to reflect the wealth and income originating from natural resources to the general public by the ruling elite (Abdel-Fadil, 2015).

As it is seen from Table 1.1 above, although it is one of the countries with the largest oil and natural gas reserves in the world when compared to other Gulf countries, Iran lags far behind in terms of per capita income and there is an economic crisis and poverty throughout the country. There is no welfare reflected in the general society, and the country is struggling with unemployment and inflation. While it is seen that the “consensus” in income distribution between the ruling class and society in the Gulf countries is not in question in Iran, the current apolitical situation in these countries regarding political rights claims seems to be the exact opposite in Iran. In other words, contrary to an apolitical social order in the Gulf countries, there is a politicized Iranian society in line with economic and political demands. Another disadvantage of Iran in this regard to the Gulf countries is that it has more than twice the population of Saudi Arabia, the largest country in the Gulf (Gengler, 2015).

Although the argument that Iran’s income from oil and natural gas sales is not reflected in welfare to the general public due to the international embargoes is partially true, the country has faced, such inequality in income distribution cannot fully explain this situation. While there are rentier states such as Iran and Venezuela, which are rich in natural resources and face economic difficulties due to international embargoes, there are also countries that are rich with natural resources, where there are no embargoes and where there are serious inequalities in income distribution. Apart from the Gulf countries, we can cite countries such as OPEC countries, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan as examples in this category (Franke et all, 2009). It is seen that in such oil and natural gas-rich rentier countries where there is no embargo, the income of the country is adopted by a small ruling elite and this income is not reflected as welfare to the society in general. Therefore, while embargoes are one of the reasons for the crisis in the Iranian economy and the poverty that has spread throughout the society, it has been determined that another important reason is the rentier management approach of the ruling elite that holds the country’s administration.

Tablo 1: *Table showing GDP, Income Distribution and Export Information of Oil and Natural Gas Rich OPEC and Other Rentier States (2021).*

Name of Country	GDP	Per Capita Income	Country Population	Export	Share of Oil and Natural Gas in Exports	Percentage of Oil Rent in GDP (2019)
Algeria	151 Billion Dollars	11.400 USD	44 Million	38 Billion Dollars	22 Billion Dollars	%14.4
Angola	66 Billion Dollars	2.000 USD	31 Million	33 Billion Dollars	32 Billion Dollars	%25.9
Congo	12 Billion Dollars	2.500 USD	4.8 Million	8.7 Billion Dollars	7 Billion Dollars	%43.4
Gabon	18 Billion Dollars	8.600 USD	2 Million	6.5 Billion Dollars	4.7 Billion Dollars	%18.8
Equatorial Guinea	11.7 Billion Dollars	8.000 USD	1.4 Million	4.3 Billion Dollars	2.6 Billion Dollars	%22.3
Venezuela	12.5 Billion Dollars	1.500 USD	28 Million	23.6 Billion Dollars	22.4 Billion Dollars	%11.4
Libya	24 Billion Dollars	3.600 USD	6.6 Million	25.7 Billion Dollars	24.2 Billion Dollars	%43.9
Nigeria	514 Billion Dollars	2.400 USD	206 Million	64.8 Billion Dollars	45.1 Billion Dollars	%7.4
Azerbaijan	49 Billion Dollars	4.900 USD	10 Million	20 Billion Dollars	18 Billion Dollars	%21.9
Kazakhstan	188 Billion Dollars	9.800 USD	19 Million	47 Billion Dollars	29 Billion Dollars	%13.8
Turkmenistan	54 Billion Dollars	9.000 USD	6 Million	7.8 Billion Dollars	6.8 Billion Dollars	%9.6

Source: *IMF (Accessed)* https://www.imf.org/, *OPEC (Accessed)* https://www.opec.org/, *ITC (Accessed)* https://www.intracen.org/, 5 September 2021

As can be seen in Table 1.2, a large part of the export and budget revenues of such oil and natural gas-rich countries are obtained from the sale of natural resources, and the country's resources are generally adopted by a small ruling elite. The coordination of the distribution function of the country's incomes by the ruling elite and the lack of a “consensus” regarding the income distribution among the ruling elite/society have brought along the development of the welfare level in these countries. In this type of rentier states, which are based on oil and natural gas and do not have a traditional production economy, the lack of a questioning social order played an active role in the transformation of regimes into authoritarian structures (Kuru, 2014). In the light of all these evaluations, as can be seen in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 examples, rentier state types are divided into two: the first type of rentier states with high social welfare, led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Iran, and Iraq and the second type of rentier states, which are listed in Table 1.2 and have a low level of social welfare.

Findings and Conclusion

2.1. Findings

As a result of all these analyzes, we can say that Iran is included in the second type of rentier state category. The adoption of the country's resources by a ruling elite and the distribution of these revenues in line with their own interests are seen as the most important feature of the Iranian type of rentier state mentality (Levins, 2012). We can state that there is no production economy, that a significant part of the budget and export revenues are obtained from the sale of natural resources, and that all these resources are used by the regime administrators with military and political means in various geographies in line with different geopolitical interests, as other important points that distinguish Iran from other rentier states. The most important thing that distinguishes the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has regional ambitions and does not hesitate to engage in military conflicts in many regions in line with its geopolitical interests, from other rentier states that are rich in oil and natural resources, is the motivation of the current ruling class to spread its ideological doctrine in the geographies it sees in its sphere of influence. With this ideological motivation, the regime administrators continue to transfer the country's financial resources to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan and many other regions where the country's geopolitical interests are at stake.

We can cite Saudi Arabia as another example of a rentier state with strong ideological motivation and regional ambitions like Iran. Both countries, which are in the regional competition, continue to use different paramilitary forces in proxy wars in many geographies, especially in Yemen. On the other hand, other rentier states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar can be involved in the developments in some countries of the region, mostly with their financial resources (Sim, 2021). Iran and Saudi Arabia, are seen as rentier states with two different forms of government, competing in the regional competition, trying to expand their military and political influence in different regions in line with their own geopolitical interests with their ideological motivations and interventionist behaviours. The most important differences are that in the Saudi Arabian type of rentier state, there is a consensus on the distribution of the country's incomes to the general population and the level of welfare, while Iran lacks this consensus.

2.2. Conclusion

As a result, when we look at the examples of states other than Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is not possible to say that there is a direct link between the rentier state system and the foreign policy behaviours of the countries. When the foreign policy preferences of these states, excluding Iran and Saudi Arabia, are examined, the profile of countries that are in integrated relations with the world politically and economically and that are status quo emerges. However, the example of rentier-type states with regional ambitions and geopolitical interests, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, shows us that there can be rentier states that can follow interventionist policies and expand their sphere of influence in their foreign policy behaviours. The involvement of countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the determination of regional policies in different countries with their financial resources can be shown as another example of intervention in the foreign policy behaviours of rentier states.

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