



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 5

# **Emerging Challenges in International Relations and Transnational Politics of the GCC**

### Workshop Directors:

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### **Abstract**

Over the past 18 months, the geopolitically critical Gulf region has been adjusting to new political, social, economic, and security realities. Traditional understandings of politics in the region – a preference for gradualism, for example – have been challenged by the emergence of a new generation of GCC rulers, who seek to establish legitimacy through ambitious new development or foreign policy regimes. New regional realignments and a stronger rejection of Iranian external interference from the US Administration has also shifted the political and strategic environment in which the GCC states operate. Simultaneously, migration patterns, the transnational diffusion of culture and ideas, and the interconnected nature of social and religious networks in the Gulf have been repurposed by economic development strategies that include a focus on foreign direct investment, global diversification of sovereign wealth fund assets, and the generation of soft power through ownership of traditional and new media outlets.

These changes suggest a reassessment of the state of International Relations and its various sub-fields as applied to the Gulf region is needed. Existing research on the international

political economy of oil, for instance, has focused heavily on the link between oil wealth, external intervention, and violent conflict, with obvious implications for regime stability and state-society relations, but far less so on the influence of international or transnational social and political variables, despite their clear impact following the various Gulf iterations of the Arab Spring. Another example lies in the profuse literature on Gulf security, which still mostly analyses regional issues through the lens of external interests and sensitivities rather than through a focus on the Arab Gulf States' own perception of their strategic environment and on the specific strategies they deploy accordingly, despite considerable evolutions in foreign and security policies of regional leaders which completely redefine the dynamics of bilateral and multilateral relations within the Gulf, and between the Gulf and external actors at the broader regional and global levels.

Within this context, this workshop will offer new insights into the international and transnational relationships that shape contemporary Gulf politics. The selected papers will highlight the interdisciplinary nature of research on international politics in the Gulf region, drawing from political economy, critical security studies, anthropology, geography, political science, and sociology. They will challenge traditional distinctions between domestic and international spheres, revealing the transnational spread of ideologies, security perceptions, and political attitudes.

With the 10th edition of the Gulf Research Meeting taking place at a time when the Gulf region has faced numerous turbulent years, this workshop will come at a key moment to assess the way in which the Gulf states respond to these new or emerging challenges and the significant ramifications this can have, not only for those seeking to understand contemporary Gulf states, but also for the long-term sustainability and balance of power in this critical region.

## **Description and Rationale**

### **Objectives**

The aim of this workshop is to provide a rigorous rethinking of the connections between the domestic, transnational, and international spheres. As a result, we expect to challenge a number of preconceptions about social, economic, and political dynamics, both in the Gulf region and outside it. How, for example, is the architecture of the rentier state affected by transnational social relationships, including religious networks; and what does this mean for our understanding of the influential literature on rentierism? How do GCC sovereign wealth funds interact, and what does this mean for international capital flows and Gulf development trajectories? How is the paradigm of Gulf security affected or redefined by the empowerment of a growing number of smaller countries in the region, by the highly personalized policymaking processes and international relations within the Arabian Peninsula and with external powers? And how do these policies, focused on the political and military dimensions of security, impact the economic as well as the “softer” dimensions of security, i.e. societal, –human– and environmental security?

This workshop is thus a direct response to a number of literatures that inform our understanding of the GCC states. The work builds on these literatures, challenging traditional assumptions about domestic society, economy, and polity in light of shifting international conditions, offering nuance to those assumptions that are upheld, and alternatives for those assumptions that are not.

The ultimate purpose of this workshop is to publish a collective volume edited by both workshop directors as well as Dr. Courtney Freer. The edited book will be based on the individual papers presented at this workshop and at a previous workshop which took place at the MESA Conference 2018. We intend this volume to represent some of the best scholarship on the interconnectivity between the domestic, transnational, and international spheres.

### **Scope**

The workshop is focused primarily on how shifting regional and international contexts affect the domestic development and politics of the GCC region. In doing so, it hopes to foster a conception of the international, transnational, and domestic spheres as irrevocably connected. Papers on bilateral relationships between the GCC states and other parts of the world are welcome, where these are connected to broader patterns of shifting international relations, but the focus should remain on the impact of these relations for the GCC states. We expect contributors to engage with cross-disciplinary analysis, and that the papers focus on contemporary challenges to the practice or theory of international relations in the Gulf region, particularly those which have occurred in the region over the past decade. As the ultimate goal of this workshop is the publication of an edited volume, a particular attention will be given to the diversity of case studies covered and/or the theoretical frameworks used in the different papers.

### **Contribution to Gulf Studies**

While the literature on international relations and transnational politics in the Gulf is flourishing, several watershed events over the past decade –including, but not limited to, the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the election of Donald Trump, the ongoing wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the unresolved Gulf crisis– make this a timely moment to rethink traditional theoretical approaches and understandings of these topics in the contemporary Middle East.

### **Anticipated Participants**

We expect papers for this workshop may address some of the following topics:

- Sociology of transnational communities
- Shifting international security challenges, including –but not limited to– the proliferation of violent extremism as well as cyber and information security issues
- Evolving Gulf security agendas in the past decade
- Role of external security alliances in GCC security

- Foreign direct investment and shifting foreign policy priorities, for example enhanced cooperation with the East Asian economies
- Labour migration and economic diversification in the post-2014 environment
- Evolving dynamics of the rentier state
- New and emerging regional relationships, for example between the Saudis and nationalist Shia groups in Iraq
- Climate change and international energy politics
- Food and water security issues in the Gulf
- Air, land, and sea transport networks in an era of increased rivalries within the Arabian Peninsula as well as between Iran and the GCC states

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Dr. Jessie Moritz** is a Lecturer at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University (ANU). She joined the ANU in July 2018 following the completion of a postdoctoral research fellowship with Princeton University's Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa, where she focused on post-2014 economic reform programs in the GCC. She received her PhD from the ANU in March 2017; her dissertation, "Slick Operators: Revising Rentier State Theory for the Modern Arab States of the Gulf," received the 2017 Dissertation Award from the *Association for Gulf and Peninsula Studies*. Jessie has held a number of visiting fellow positions in the Gulf and UK. In March 2018, Jessie was a Visiting Fellow at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, in 2013 she was a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and from 2013-2014 she joined the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University as a Graduate Fellow. Her current research focuses on the political economy of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, with a particular focus on state-society relations and economic diversification strategies.

Jessie has held a number of visiting fellow positions in the Gulf and UK. In March 2018, Jessie was a Visiting Fellow at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, in 2013 she was a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and from 2013-2014 she joined the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University as a Graduate Fellow. Her current research focuses on the political economy of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, with a particular focus on state-society relations and economic diversification strategies.

**Dr. Emma Soubrier** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre Michel de l'Hospital, Université Clermont Auvergne (UCA, France) and a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Middle East Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University (Washington, DC). Her research, which focuses on the reshaping of Gulf security along the new dynamics of foreign and defense policies of the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, is sponsored by the "Ambassador" Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Directorate-General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS, at the French Ministry of Defense).

Emma received her PhD in Political Science from the UCA in December 2017. In March 2018, her thesis, entitled “What security for the “Small Princes-States” of the Gulf? Defense policies and procurement strategies of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates”, received a Dissertation Award from the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies (IHEDN, France). Emma, who also is the head of the International Division at the Center for Security and Defense Studies (CESED), has published numerous articles and book chapters in French and English on Gulf security issues. From 2012 to 2015, her research benefited from a financial support by the Directorate-General for Armament (DGA, at the French MoD) and Airbus Defence & Space (ex Cassidian). In 2013, she was one of the Young Strategists selected by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and Johns Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

### **Selected Readings**

Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds.), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies* (Routledge, 2016)

David DesRoches and Dania Thafer (eds.), *The Arms Trade, Military Services and the Security Market in the Gulf* (Gerlach Press, 2016)

Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East: Old Games, New Rules* (Routledge, 2007)

F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

David Held and Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *The Transformation of the Gulf: Politics, Economics and the Global Order* (Routledge, 2012)

Michael Hudson and Mimi Kirk (eds.), *Gulf Politics and Economics in a Changing World* (World Scientific, 2014)

Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *The Political Economy of the Persian Gulf* (Hurst, 2012)

Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (IB Tauris, 2015)

Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (Palgrave, 2016)



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
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**2019 Gulf Research Meeting**

**July 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>, 2019**  
**University of Cambridge**

**Workshop 5**

**Emerging Challenges in International Relations and  
Transnational Politics of the GCC**

**Paper Presenter Abstracts:**

**Applying small state theory to the Gulf region in the framework of the  
English School – challenges, limitations and modifications**

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Abstract:

While at least three out of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can be categorized as a small state (depending on the definition), the wide application of International Relations (IR) theories related to the study of small state foreign policy is yet to be evolved. With few notable exceptions researchers aiming to describe the role of the small Gulf states in the Middle East either chose a different theoretical framework or skipped to build up a proper framework. On the other hand, students of small state studies, an evolving sub-discipline of IR, prefer to concentrate on the European continent and a few states in Asia (e.g. Singapore or Taiwan).

The aim of the study is to investigate the applicability of small state theories to the Gulf region. While in the research both traditional schools of IR (neorealism and neoliberalism) will be referred to, I will structure the analysis on the basis of the English School, a theory which can provide an appropriate framework to interpret particularities of regional

systems. This is especially important due to the European background of small state studies. As a result, it is expectable that limitations, alterations will be necessary to approximate the two disciplines, which is why a specific aim of the research will be to enlist such notions.

The structure of the research will be based on three key topics which pose severe challenges to small state studies to be fully applicable to the Gulf region. Firstly, the distinct nature of the Middle Eastern state and the evolution of regimes will be put in focus. Secondly, the norms related to the primary institution of “conflict” will be investigated in the Middle East from a perspective of small states. Thirdly, the effects of the role of smallness in the identity projection of small states will be discussed.

Each part is concluded with a short case study which emphasize the importance and the particularity of the specific subject. In the first part, the special nature of the Middle Eastern state will be illustrated with a comparison between Bahrain and Qatar, while in the second, the protective role of the League of Arab States, as a derivative secondary institution of the norm of Arab solidarity (limiting the possibility of interstate armed conflicts) will be discussed. In the third section about identity projection, the self-reflective discourse of Kuwaiti diplomats will be investigated in the UN Security Council in the context of the war of 1990-1991. The general conclusion of the article is that in order to understand the exact leverage of small Gulf states, we have to apply a modified version of small state theory on the basis of the regional alterations of primary institutions, especially those related to modern statehood, interstate wars and the normative perception of smallness.

## **Intrinsic Power of the Small Sheikdoms: Assessing Bilateral GCC Relations**

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Abstract:

A key point of tension in the GCC is how its three smallest members pursue independence from or influence with Saudi Arabia. Qatar maintains cavalier defiance of Saudi’s hegemonic ambitions. Kuwait prioritizes cautious involvement in Saudi’s interventions but avoids its blockade of Qatar. Bahrain remains compliant by echoing Saudi rhetoric and joining its foreign policy initiatives. How and why do these small Gulf states pursue different postures toward Saudi Arabia? I argue that differences in their relations with Saudi Arabia stem from the variance in their power assets. Drawing from the work of Tom Long, I assess that each state holds the “collective” power of GCC membership and the “derivative” power of US security patronage. Where they differ is the nature of their “particular-intrinsic” power. This power form encompasses the material resources of a robust economy, which represent the key factor in a small state maintaining an independent stance toward a larger neighbor, and the ideational resources of diplomatic and cultural

values projection, which can provide a small state conditional independence. Furthermore, a small state's societal stability can enhance independence, but cannot create it. Qatar's materially powerful economy, owing to its store of natural gas, and ideationally powerful values projection, along with its stable society, allow it to hedge against Saudi Arabia with considerable independence. Despite Kuwait's weaker economy and contentious society, its projection of ideationally powerful values allows it to leash-slip with conditional independence. Finally, Bahrain's feeble economy, minimal values projection, and divided society force it to bond onto Saudi initiatives in a bid to gain influence. This paper aims to contribute a clearer understanding of how conceptually small states can marshal specific forms of material and ideational power to reshape their region's sociopolitical dynamics.

## **Amplification and Persuasion in Small-State Diplomacy: Evidence from the United Arab Emirates**

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Abstract:

In this article I argue that states have more than economic heft or military might in their diplomatic arsenal when it comes to influencing the behavior of major powers – even when the “influencer” in question is a considerably weaker partner in a bilateral relationship, and when threats to inflict costs on the stronger partner or abandon it for a rival are not credible. Drawing on older “community power” debates about power and influence in U.S. domestic politics, I build on suggestions that international relations theory should consider other “faces” of power. The first is agenda-setting, or “amplification,” which highlights (or hides) existing perspectives and information in ways that support the foreign-policy interests of the influencing state. The second, and potentially more powerful “face” of power is to reshape actors’ very understanding of what their “interests” actually are. Drawing on evidence of diplomatic practices by the UAE in the United States, I argue that important political actors understand that influence in international affairs derives at least in part from these forms of power, and that this can be an effective mechanism for weaker parties to shape the policies of stronger partners – even against previous understandings of the country’s objective “interest.”

# **The Impact of Social Media on International Relations: The Case of Qatar-GCC Crisis**

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Abstract:

It is a fact in history that inter-state interactions, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, drive and shape international relations. Indeed, international relations have been framed and governed by treaties, pacts, agreements, and national mutual interests. Institutionally, departments, or ministries in charge of foreign affairs are tasked with the management of international relations. However, national and international media certainly have an impact in defining or pre-determining international policies thanks to analyses, speculations, and leaks. Traditionally, the media mainly used to reflect the official positions of states. Most media outlets targeting international audience operate under the direct supervision of the foreign affairs' institutions; i.e., Alhurra, France 24, Russia today, DW, BBC world, and others.

With the fast-paced developments in social media and the emergence of effective platforms such as Twitter, international relations have come under intense pressure and scrutiny by ordinary citizens. Now, any person can connect, lobby, and influence the process of decisionmaking in international relations. The power of social media is tapped by populist leaders to interact with their followers directly while ministries of foreign affairs face to this most daunting challenge of rising populism. Influential activists on Twitter seem to dominate the political scene increasingly. They indeed express their discontent with politicians and tend to provide alternative narratives that counterweigh the official narratives.

The late Gulf crisis, involving Qatar and three GCC Countries and Egypt, for instance, has proved that Twitter has the dangerous potential of playing a negative role by widening the gap between regimes and eventually shattering relationships between peoples in the GCC region. The dispute, unlike any other international dispute, broke out openly on media and social networks. As a matter of fact, during the first 10 days of the crisis (May 25-June 5th 2017) the GCC relations were under severe attack by activists on social networks providing fanatical narratives which exacerbated the tensions and led to the breakup-up of diplomatic relations between the state of Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt on the other. Following the official 'blockade' or 'boycott,' as one may wish to call it, the president of the United States Mr. Donald Trump conveyed in a tweet his favorable position that was not in line with the position of the State Department. Since the eruption of the crisis and its subsequent developments, the public has been fed with an endless stream of information and predictions through social media much more than any official source.

This paper analyzes the personal narrative carried by social networks on the Gulf crisis and how it has contributed to shaping international relations between countries involved and other regional and global powers. This can appropriately be described as the ‘twitterization’ of international politics.

## **A personalistic ruler among the House of Saud: understanding MBS’s policy choices its effects on the Saudi Arabian international image**

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Abstract:

Saudi Arabia has changed after the rise of King Salman and his crown prince son, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS). Traditionally known for having a cautious, backstage approach to foreign policy, Saudi Arabia has since pursued a more assertive profile. The question that drives this article is whether these changes are associated with a personalist move of centralisation and whether it has affected Saudi Arabian international image. MBS is portrayed as an ambitious and modern leader, what has been celebrated primarily by the Saudi youth. Many are excited about his promises of reforms and economic diversification. Distancing himself from the slow traditional decision-making process of the dynasty, MBS’ rise to power resembles other personalist strongmen around the world. With that in mind, this article sheds light on the possible links between personalism, international adventurism and image’s perception. Personalist rulers tend to perceive lower costs on riskier policies, becoming more unpredictable and unreliable. I claim that MBS’ centralisation of power is one of the explanations for reckless choices in international politics. I argue that many actors are becoming more sceptical over Riyadh’s policies and that can endanger the very base in which MBS holds its popularity. I maintain that not only economic austerity due to oil prices but also the style of leadership that MBS is seeking can hazard his goal of turning Saudi Arabia in a dominant force in the Middle East.

## **The Gulf Monarchies: Promoting their Image to Impact the World**

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Abstract:

Competitiveness between States, regions and cities has probably been one of the greatest challenges of the globalization process facing countries since the 1990’s. In order to

establish their position in an ever more global and competitive world, countries have to adapt strategies to promote themselves to be part of the global world map. The Gulf countries are developing an assertive branding strategy focused on tourism, aviation, high class events and exhibitions, higher education (Hazim 2010, 4731). In that competition, the coining of a positive image and reputation is essential not only on a regional scale, but foremost on the global scale. Dubai is probably the best example of the modernisation of the Persian Gulf in the 21st Century, being a model for the Arab Gulf States, while building place brand image awareness (Govers and Go, 2009). In less than two decades, Dubai has become an icon of modernity, wealth, luxury and success, so much that one tends to forget that this global city is located in the Middle East, a region that is mainly associated with conflicts and chaos. The Gulf States or rather the Emirates are competing with Dubai for nation brand hegemony in the region, using all the means possible: architecture, sports events, cultural projects, airlines companies or education.

This article addresses images as key elements of Gulf country narratives and reputation in the globalisation process and global competition, and how positive narratives through a high level of worldwide media coverage may expose accordingly to global critics. The image projection is also sometimes a source of rivalries, tensions and crises. That's why the Gulf States' images are more and more constructed by international communication agencies advising Emirs and Gulf governments, and also shaping their policies according to external interests and to regional balance of powers, and not only to national ones.

## **Transnational Identity and the Gulf Crisis: Changing Narratives of Belonging in Qatar**

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Abstract:

On June 5, 2017, regional neighbors Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, along with Egypt, broke diplomatic relations with Qatar and closed their land, sea, and air borders. Despite brotherly rhetoric and deep similarities of culture and religion, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—have experienced regional conflict before, competing in geopolitical and strategic areas as well as purviews of soft power such as heritage claims and sporting events hosting rights. Yet while regional conflict is not new, the scale and scope of the current crisis—and its economic, political, and sociocultural consequences—are unlike the past.

What does this ongoing regional crisis mean for the future of the Gulf's signature transnationalism: the khalījī identity? This sociocultural “supranational identity narrative” (Koch 2019, 194) encompasses the shared backgrounds of the people of the region, who

are bonded together by heritage, culture, religion, and marriage. Yet the current crisis has forcibly separated the khalījī people, both physically and emotionally, in unprecedented ways. New research (Mitchell and Allagui 2019) posits that these forcible separations are reducing the salience of khalījī identity, suggesting that the ongoing political crisis is shifting the discourse of belonging in the Gulf.

This paper explores the salience of transnational khalījī identity through an analysis of the new National Museum of Qatar, which opened, after years of delays, in March 2019. National museums tell the story of a nation, and the Qatari government's immense financial investment over a decade of work demonstrates the importance of getting the country's new and improved national narrative "just right" (Mitchell and Curtis 2018). Yet museums do not speak to a domestic audience only, but to regional and international audiences as well. Before the blockade, a portrayal of khalījī culture and identity would have been expected in Qatar's national museum. But in the context of crisis, how is the museum portraying the transnational connections, the histories and relationships, between the GCC countries? How are museum-goers perceiving and responding to these transnational narratives? And in the larger sense, what can this case study tell us about the salience of transnational identity in times of conflict? This paper draws from original fieldwork (conducted in Doha, March–May 2019), including multiple museum visits<sup>2</sup> and 233 ethnographic interviews with museum-goers, to investigate Qatari and expatriate perceptions of the museum and its narratives of identity. The conclusion links to larger research questions of transnational belonging in times of regional crisis.

## **Transnational Identity & Foreign Policy: Tribal Identity & the Gulf Crisis**

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Abstract:

As political divisions in the Persian Gulf become increasingly defined, the former regional and cooperative status quo of Gulf Cooperation Council appears increasingly outdated. The ongoing Gulf crisis has largely been framed in relation to diplomatic and economic determinants. However, socio-political factors regarding tribal issues were also at play, revealing the underlying importance of tribal identities to the Gulf politics and international relations. This paper studies the leveraging of collective identity in foreign policy and regime security, using the case study of the Gulf crisis and tribal identity. Using the analytical lens of Holsti's Role Theory, this paper explores the ways in which states present themselves as fulfilling a specific kind of role, detailing the way domestic societal politics can shape international relations. Following this, the discussion progresses to a detailed exposition of tribal identity, as a system of identification but also as an iteration of transnational ideology that can work to undermine sovereign boundaries and regimes.

Owing to the interplay between politics and national role conceptions, the paper then critically analyses how tribal identity is engaged, specifically in relation to the mobilisation of tribes, in the context of the diplomatic crisis. The efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have focused on directing tribes in Qatar to turn against the Qatari regime and sow domestic discord geared toward political destabilisation. The mobilisation of tribes aimed at directing loyalty to blood-ties over political border and state sovereignty. The implications of the mobilising tribal identities are then examined from a regime survival perspective, looking in particular at the gradual consolidation of a Qatari national identity as a consequence of identity re-configurations associated with the ongoing crisis. A key concern is the way in which Qatar has been able to strategically employ new and distinct roles in order to resist efforts by external Gulf actors to induce political discord based upon tribal divisions. Qatar has sought explicitly to reshape its role in a Western and neo-liberal mould, meeting to a greater extent the expected role of a 'modern' advanced state whose identity is oriented around political and national as opposed to tribal connections.

## **Transnational Clerical Associations in Qatar and the UAE: The Competition over Islamic Publics**

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Abstract:

Over the past decade, the small Gulf states of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have developed distinct visions about the role of Islam in politics and have demonstrated considerable ambition in setting the course of regional politics. Lacking their own indigenous clerical establishments of the requisite heft, these states have instead played host to influential associations of Islamic scholars, the Doha-based International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS), and the Abu Dhabi-based Muslim Council of Elders (MCE) and associated peace-driven clerical initiatives.

This paper will examine this novel injection of rentier wealth into the religious field by these two wealthy monarchies, and the challenge they pose to the more traditional religious establishment of Saudi Arabia. These organizations have provided their host governments with important vehicles for influencing Islamic discourse and reaching Islamic publics at a time of incredible political upheaval and political re-alignment: the IUMS championing the youth-driven political uprisings and injection of political Islam into post-revolution governments in Tunisia and Egypt, and the MCE backing the re-emergence of pro-state clerical positions in post-coup Egypt and countering political Salafism in its manifestations in jihadism and political sectarianism. At the same time, these two organizations have

created difficulties for the loyalist clerics of Saudi Arabia at a difficult time of political transition.

Theoretically, this study will highlight the difficulty of capturing today's fluid, transnational Islamic politics in state-society based rentier models. As ideas, relationships, and rentier dollars reach beyond borders they challenge more 'static' rentier loyalty and call into question the model of state, or bureaucratized, religious establishments.

## **Master Developers: The Transnational Politics of Gulf Financial Aid and Development Design**

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Abstract:

The Gulf states are engaged in a battle of economic intervention that rivals the creation of the Bretton Woods system after World War II. They are a formidable source of development finance without economic ideology, without a model of economic growth to prescribe, other than an understanding of state-led investment and a reliance on personalistic politics and manto-man alliances. This Gulf-led intervention and mode of development finance challenges a half century of development theory and shared understandings of the key concepts and variables determining economic growth in the developing world. The effects will be profound and are only beginning to emerge across the Middle East and Horn of Africa to Southwest Asia. We should look to the recipient sites of GCC competition to understand how the deployment of foreign aid, direct cash support to central banks, and promises of foreign direct investment affect national political decision-making and bargaining. This regional security architecture is evolving as a sphere of influence of the Gulf, expanding to the north to Jordan and Egypt, and to the south to Yemen and southwest to the vital trade corridor around the Arabian Sea toward the Horn and Red Sea, and to the east in Pakistan. In some recipient sites of Gulf financial intervention, we see a hybrid model, in which traditional development finance agents like the IMF partner with Gulf funds that retain some element of conditionality and structural adjustment in line with liberal economic models of growth, as in Egypt and Jordan. In their expansionist foreign policies, these states are engaged in an effort to secure political influence, but also economic security through access to agricultural production, as well as consumer markets for their oil, gas and petrochemical products. In a symbiotic relationship with Chinese economic statecraft, the GCC states use their tools of investment and financial aid to both secure their own economic and security interests. The GCC states, led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, are now global development actors.

## **The geopolitics of trade routes and infrastructures in the Gulf: rethinking the role of connectivity in the region's rivalries**

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Abstract:

Over the past decade, Gulf countries have invested massively in the development of trade and logistical infrastructures designed to boost the capacity of their ports, airports road and railways. With decreasing oil prices pushing them towards increased economic diversification, the expansion of this infrastructures represents an important way of capitalising on Gulf countries' strategic location as a logistical hub between Europe, Africa and Asia. At the same time, this has enabled them to attract Chinese investments in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Ports like Jebel Ali in Dubai, Hamad in Qatar, Duqm in Oman, Jeddah and King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia have all planned to greatly increase their capacity over the coming years. Despite the looming risk of over-capacity in the Persian Gulf, new projects for air and land connections keep flourishing, even if these have not always been implemented. Some Gulf countries, especially the UAE, have also increasingly invested in the infrastructure development of other neighbouring countries. This has seen the flourishing of a network of trade routes and connections that have reinforced the centrality of their own domestic installations, while also allowing the Emirates to project strategic clout throughout the region.

While economic incentives have certainly driven this trend, there is also an inherent political element regarding the control of trade routes. In a region so central to global trade, Gulf transport and logistics infrastructure tells us a lot about the power dynamics that shape the region. It is therefore not surprising if recent news in the region has been heavily dominated by incidents and political tensions around key chokepoints and trade routes. In May-June 2019, a series of attacks against vessels and oil tankers around the strait of Hormuz raised concerns of a possible return to the 1980's "tanker war". Recent attacks on transiting oil tankers have reminded Gulf countries of their great economic and political vulnerability, and the political pressures that can be applied on them through disruption to their trade routes. Such incidents reinforce the urgency of developing alternative routes. Similarly, in June 2017, the blockade imposed on Qatar by its neighbours has vividly exposed its dependency on the Emirati port of Jebel Ali and has forced it to rapidly find alternative routes.

These events have demonstrated the extent to which interdependency and connectivity can be powerful tools of political pressure. The current boom in infrastructure development across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can be seen as an attempt at strategic hedging by Gulf states.

The case of United Arab Emirates (UAE) is particularly evocative. The UAE fears the hegemony of its Jebel Ali port will be challenged in the coming years by alternative routes bypassing the strait of Hormuz. As such, it has continued to develop its network of ports beyond the Gulf, through investments by DP World in the Horn of Africa, as well as in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean regions. This has allowed it to gain greater control over supply chains around the region. By using logistical infrastructure as a tool of economic statecraft, the UAE has been so far the most skilful Gulf country at articulating the economic, political and military dimensions of its infrastructure developments.

The map of infrastructures and trade routes in the Gulf reflects the complex network of alliances and dynamics shaping the region. Infrastructure development is not contingent on geopolitics. But both are deeply interconnected. There are different ways in which logistical infrastructures can be considered as geopolitical assets. Namely, their potential to stimulate economic development, secure trade and energy needs, diversify strategic partnerships, lessen the dependency on potential rivals, and to enhance possible military capabilities given the potential dual use of most logistical infrastructure.

The flourishing of these new ports and railway projects poses the question of their geopolitical impact on the region, and the meaning of interdependency for the region's stability at a moment of heightened tensions and rivalries. How do infrastructure development projects in the GCC fit within broader geopolitical agendas? What are the short and long term consequences of these developments on the regional balance of power? Is connectivity and interdependency in the Gulf leading to greater stability or more instability?

## **Deep Integration and the Rentier State: Explaining US Free Trade Agreements in the GCC**

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Abstract:

Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) have served as central building blocks in the US's Deep Integration agenda which aims to abolish "behind the border" restrictions on trade. In 2003, US President George W. Bush launched the US-Middle East Free Trade Area, an initiative aimed at integrating the US with the Middle East through a series of FTAs by 2013. During Bush's term, two Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, namely Bahrain and Oman, signed bilateral FTAs with the US.

The question of why developing states conclude regional and bilateral free trade agreements (RBTAs) with developed countries despite the far-reaching obligations that

they entail has received considerable attention. However, the topic of North-South RBTAs has to date not been explored at length in the specific context of rentier states. Yet, rentier states that conclude RBTAs with developed states pose a specific theoretical dilemma. Because rentier states rely on the allocation of resource rents for their political existence, political elites in such states are presumed to be prone to resource nationalism and thus highly unlikely to relinquish control over or liberalise their resource sectors. Nevertheless, despite the extensive scope of US FTAs and their imposition of far-reaching reforms that erode state control over most sectors of the economy including oil and gas, two rentier states in the GCC, namely Bahrain and Oman, have signed such agreements. This article therefore asks why Bahrain and Oman signed US FTAs whereas the rest of the GCC states did not.

To answer the question, this article employs a mixed method of nested analysis that combines cross-case typologies with in-depth case studies of Bahrain and the UAE. It finds that the responses of the six GCC states to the US free trade initiative were strongly conditioned by their respective levels of resource wealth. Resource-poor states, including Bahrain and Oman, were unconstrained by resource nationalism in their pursuit of enhanced market access for their textile and apparel exports to the US. Conversely, resource-rich states, including the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were likely constrained from concluding FTAs with the US by the need to protect their oil and gas sectors.

## **Military Reform in the GCC**

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Abstract:

Three Gulf states—Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have demonstrated a turn toward military activism in recent years, employing their armed forces outside their borders. Operating both independently and in coalitions, these states have project power in places like Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan, representing a marked shift in their strategic culture. While the three countries had significantly built up their militaries in the wake of the Gulf War, procuring high-end armaments and pursuing security cooperation activities with external states, their armed forces rarely deployed in combat operations. Instead, the Gulf monarchies traditionally used the military as a tool to achieve broader political objectives and ensure internal regime security.

More recently, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have broken this mold as they have pursued expeditionary operations. Their experiences in Libya and Yemen, in particular, have made the shortcomings of their militaries abundantly clear. This has seemingly prompted ambitious programs of military reform, ostensibly intended to improve military

effectiveness and push their armed forces to the next level. However, these reforms are not merely focused on improving operational performance but rather transforming the military as a whole. But to do so requires major changes to long-standing status quos in the three states. For example, changing the structure of the armed forces means moving away from traditional coup-proofing measure intended instill loyalty of the military to the ruling family. It also requires altering the existing social and economic contract between the state and citizens, as the military moves from being a tool of state largesse. These are major changes that will not be without challenge for the Qatari, Saudi, and Emirati regimes, begging the question as to why these reforms are being pursued.

This paper will explore how military reform will alter existing approaches to security, society and economy in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, drawing upon existing literature about coup-proofing strategies, military effectiveness, rentier state systems, and the social contract in the Gulf. It will argue that military reform efforts in all three states are not driven by the mere desire for military effectiveness or modernization. Instead, military reform should be viewed as one part of a broader transformation process initiated by key leaders—Qatari Emir Sh Tamim, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi—to alter the state in light of new geopolitical, economic, and security realities. As such, military reform programs in each country are being used to achieve broader aims—a focus on external threats, reinforcement of national identity, and engineering an indigenous workforce, for example—reflecting the new priorities of these rulers.

## **From open space to new frontier: Gulf air sovereignty emerging?**

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Abstract:

Until two decades ago, the airspace was not an area where the Gulf States expressed their sovereignty the most visibly: the space was used for military or commercial purposes by others, sometimes with the Gulf states' consent (such as the United States or the United Kingdom), sometimes without (such as Iraq or Iran). This has progressively changed since the 1990s, when a number of factors led to a profound change in Gulf approaches to the airspace. All Gulf States – with the exception of Yemen, which has evolved in the opposite direction – have asserted their air sovereignty in a process at first following conventional notions of the concept, including achieving recognition of the sovereign airspace and slow build-up of institutions and capabilities. Particularly from the early 2000s onwards the Gulf States (especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) have gone beyond these rather narrow definitions, exploring dimensions of sovereignty hitherto reserved to its territorial embodiment. The use of the airspace for economic purposes, domestic security, and even coercive diplomacy to the extent seen in the Gulf points to a larger process of sovereignty assertion. This is particularly visible in the dynamic interplay between air

sovereignty and national identity: here, too, developments are reinforcing each other. This confirms theories on state-formation more generally – thereby disproving notions of Arab exceptionalism when it comes to sovereignty and identity -, while raising important questions about the concept of air sovereignty, and its potential evolution.

## **Defense Cooperation in the Arabian Peninsula: The Enduring Marginalization of the Gulf Cooperation Council**

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Abstract:

Between its foundation in 1981 and the Qatar crisis of 2017, the Gulf Cooperation Council was regularly portrayed as the most advanced regional organization within the Arab world. However, its achievements in the field of defense cooperation have always remained modest. The intra-GCC dispute of 2017 only slowed down a process of military integration that was in itself already uncertain. In fact, the dispute exacerbated pre-existing dynamics such as the overreliance on bilateral partnerships. Bilateral military cooperation has been expanding, not only with traditional powers like the US but also with new partners such as Turkey and Asian powers like India and China. Eventually, these bilateral arrangements create a fragmented security environment that contributes to the further marginalization of the GCC. Moreover, the 2017 dispute has left a space for new alternative regional proposals such as the Islamic Military Alliance or the US-led Middle East Strategic Alliance. Although these projects remain politically vague and their implementation is uncertain, they constitute competing narratives of regional cooperation. As a result, defense cooperation through the GCC is likely to remain minimal.

## **From Hegemon to Wildcard: U.S. Disarray and Gulf Insecurity**

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Abstract:

One could argue that across thirteen U.S. Presidential administrations, from Harry Truman to Donald Trump, United States policy toward the Gulf has been based on the same strategic imperative: aligning with status quo oil-producing states to contain expansionist powers that could threaten the flow of oil to world markets. From the perspective of the academic study of international relations, the default U.S. strategy—to which it inevitably

returns—is consistent with a realist approach to foreign policy. Since the expansion of Iranian influence following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran has been the principle focus of that geopolitical necessity, which unites key Arab Gulf states (particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and the U.S.

From that perspective, realist compulsions have now even overcome the main source of discord between the U.S. and its key Gulf allies: the distracting dispute over the rights of Israelis and Palestinians. The realist dictum that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” now draws together what Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif mockingly calls the “4 B’s:” U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton, Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Emirati ruler Mohammed bin Zayed. To complete the realist picture, the power vacuum produced by declining U.S. hegemony has drawn in other powers (Russia, Turkey, and China); realist analyses and policy prescriptions must therefore incorporate the complexities of their multipolar struggle to expand into newly vulnerable spaces. Thus, triumphant realism, as John Mearsheimer affirms in his new book, has revealed the “delusions of liberalism.” In short, Kenneth Waltz’ linkage of his “neorealist” theory to the ancient wisdom of Thucydides holds true as always: “The strong take what they can; the weak grant what they must.” The hapless populations of Syria, with half a million killed and ten million displaced, or of Yemen, overwhelmed by violence, cholera, and starvation, are simply caught up in Mearsheimer’s “tragedy of international relations.”

Through a wider-angle realist lens, one can view the Middle East as but one segment of a world-scale phenomenon. Authoritarian nationalist leaders are ascendant, penetrating even liberalism’s Western heartland, where they are embraced by a President of the United States. Realists, initially taken aback by the apparent rise of a post-cold war liberal order, seem to be seeing their theory vindicated by events. There is even a tone of realist “endism” in some accounts, particularly in John Mearsheimer’s recent claim that realism’s ultimate foundation is the primacy of nationalism in human nature itself. Certainly, the 21st century has so far mocked Francis Fukuyama’s now notorious proclamation that history had ended with the triumph of liberalism.

A longer view of history, however, including that of the Middle East, cautions against either the liberal or the realist version of “endism.” Since liberalism’s birth in 1776 as the foundational principle of a state, liberalism has often been on the ropes, only to revive in new liberal contagions. Liberalism, after all, overcame fascism in 1945 and Communism in 1989. Despite the fiasco following President G. W. Bush’s bid to spread “freedom and democracy” in the Middle East by invading Iraq, it is noteworthy that meaningful elections in Iraq have so far outlasted U.S. withdrawal, Iranian meddling, Kurdish separatism, the rise of ISIS and a war to defeat it. Equally noteworthy is the sheer power, rising as if from nowhere, of the Arab uprisings, even if only Tunisia still struggles to consolidate a fledgling democracy. In short, it may be premature to assume that the one-sided regional battle between rival authoritarian visions and thwarted liberal aspirations is over.

Notwithstanding Fukuyama’s moment of liberal euphoria, it is the realists who are habitually—one could say intrinsically—guilty of mistaking “snapshots” of international

relations as permanent fixtures. Waltz's depiction of history as "dismal repetitiveness" ignores the emergence of an alternative to organizing human society on a basis other than the rule (as Jefferson put it) of "wolves over sheep." From that perspective, the central drama of world politics since the founding of the United States, is not the story of the rise and fall of great powers, despite the obvious importance of that never-ending phenomenon. Instead, it is the struggle between liberalism and its enemies. From United States entry into World War II until the election of Donald Trump, world politics was animated by a monumental project: the attempt, however flawed, led by a liberal superpower, to shape a world order in which globalizing free-market capitalism, democracy, "soft" ideological power, and military force, could both protect the liberal West and opportunistically expand toward an "empire for liberty." From that perspective, post-war U.S. realpolitik was a situational tactic—aimed at containing major anti-liberal threats within that broader liberal internationalist strategy. As for the realist assumption of "survival seeking states," one can point out that suffering victims of oppression have welcomed foreign invasion to remove a tyrant, as have anti-liberal despots to save them from democratic uprisings.

Proponents of liberalism (across the spectrum from mainstream conservatives to liberal "progressives"), recognize that the liberal internationalist project is now in danger of collapse. They regard the rise of authoritarian nationalism not as some predetermined vindication of realist theory, but as a dire threat with identifiable causes, which must be understood in hopes of reestablishing a path forward. An unending stream of commentary, attempting to advance that intellectual agenda, examines factors ranging from capitalist globalization's impact on income inequality, to the impact of post-cold war NATO expansion on Putin's rise, to the advantages offered by the cyberage to authoritarianism.

This paper looks at one strand of that larger picture: the role of three conflicting ideological beliefs, whose influence rose and fell among U.S. foreign policy elites as they shaped policy toward the Persian Gulf region since the late 1960's, whose respective flaws contributed to deepening regional violence, which in turn discredited all three of those prevalent worldviews: realism, neoconservatism, and dovish progressive liberalism. Those failures, manifested domestically within the West by popular anxiety over Islamist terrorism and waves of Moslem refugees, helped pave the way for the rise of European right-wing nationalism and the election of Donald Trump.

The paper begins (in Part I) by identifying six stages in the evolution of U.S. foreign policy since 1940, starting with—and ending with—a confrontation between "America First" movements and liberal internationalists. It outlines the creation of a coherent, practical internationalist vision, formed by FDR and applied by his successors to the transformed post-war world, then divided, in reaction to the Vietnam War, into competing realist, hawkish neoconservative, and dovish "progressive liberal" fragments. U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf states followed a unique chronology, in which realpolitik outlasted the end of the Cold War, followed by an improvised search for alternatives following the 9/11 attack on America. It then turns (in Part II) to an assessment of the current Middle East security environment (in which four ambitious Gulf autocrats play a major role), including an assessment of the Trump administration's contribution to the unfolding chaotic power struggles. It concludes by arguing that the main regional actors are driven more by

desperate efforts to shore up their regimes domestically than by a “realist” struggle over the balance of interstate power. In that sense, even a modest resurrection of liberal ideology—in its unending struggle against illiberal enemies—could relaunch the regional transformation suggested by the “Arab Spring.” It must be acknowledged, unfortunately, that as liberalism’s Western heartland teeters on the brink of collapse, such hopes must rely for now more on faith than on evidence.

## **Emerging Challenges in International Relations and Transnational Politics of the GCC**

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Abstract:

The growing impact of China has been felt strongly across the globe in the last decade. Despite global economic uncertainties, China has maintained its stature as a strong contender in the current global economic and political order dominated by the US. The rise of China is further bolstered by the Belt and Road Initiative, which promises to provide an alternative route to development for countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere that have become increasingly frustrated by the continuous failure of US foreign policies and growing domestic conservatism. Although China continues distancing itself from getting directly involved in security issues in the Middle East and North Africa region, the trade volumes between China and Arab countries has seen significant increase as Beijing strengthens its economic relevance in the region. As an increasingly important player in regional politics, the UAE has shown strong interest in consolidating its ties with the rising global power. China also elevated its bilateral relationship with UAE to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” during President Xi’s visit in July 2018. The recent signing of two high profile investment plans between China and the UAE at the 2nd BRI Summit in April 2019 further demonstrates both countries’ commitment to bolstering the bilateral ties. The economic optimism has subsequently led to an unprecedented increase in social and cultural exchanges between the two partners. However, beyond the conventional focuses on trade, energy and security, observers and scholars have paid little attention to the non-economic and non-political dimensions of China’s influence in the region, namely China’s “soft power.” In fact, there has been no systematic empirical study on the perception of China in the region, which reflects the effectiveness of “soft power”. To fill in the gap in the existing literature, we employ mix methods to gauge the outcome of China’s image-building projects in the UAE. We conducted a survey and supplemented

the quantitative data with focus groups and elite interviews between January and May 2019. This paper reports the preliminary findings from this study, seeking to identify the multiple layers of “soft power” and assessing the perceptions of China among both expats and nationals in the UAE. This study adds to our knowledge of Sino-UAE relations, contributes to the study of China’s “soft power,” and provides an important case for assessing the implications of China’s rise in the MENA region and beyond.

## **Regional instability and the new assertiveness of UAE through alliance dynamics.**

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Abstract:

Given the strategic importance of the Middle East, the great powers have exercised their influence for decades through the formation of military alliances with the nations of the region. The Western powers, including the United States, while ensuring the security of the regimes in place, ensured security of their oil supply through what can be seen as a "security-oil" pact.

In particular, the bilateral alliance between the United States and the small Gulf monarchies, amidst them the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has enabled the United States to ensure the security and the stability of this young nation. This alliance as well allowed the country to gain autonomy vis-à-vis the Saudi neighbor.

If in the 2000s, we already noted the willingness of the United Arab Emirates to gain greater independence from Saudi Arabia and to exert greater regional influence, it is definitely the post-2011 regional context that highlighted the ambitions of the UAE.

The events that shook the region during the "Arab Spring" in 2011 also disrupted ongoing alliances, especially inter-Arab relations, which have adjusted to security and regional policy changes. These political developments in the Middle East have been a driving force for a reconfiguration of security dynamics among the Gulf's monarchies, and among these, the United Arab Emirates. The structure of the regional system and the foreign policy of the UAE affect their willingness to engage militarily.

However, external factors cannot be the only determinants of UAE new alliances and security cannot be the only parameters in the leaders' consideration as it has been the case after Iran revolution, Iraq-Iran war and Kuwait invasion by the latter. After these crisis, UAE choose to strengthen its alliance with the United States, conscious of the ineffectiveness of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and its leading power Saudi Arabia, to ensure its protection. So, while the region is under a similar insecurity climate, what are the reasons the UAE has now chosen to reinforce its Saudi alliance?

By taking neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, we propose to study alliance behavior by incorporating both the domestic and the regional levels, that are taken into account in the decision-making of the UAE leaders in terms of foreign policy.

We will focus on the UAE coalition with Saudi Arabia. By studying this case, we would like to demonstrate that in addition to structural factors that would justify their rapprochement in terms of «balance of power» and «balance of threat» against Iranian threat and the Muslim Brotherhood, the domestic factors play a role to understand the new alignments of the UAE with the Saudi neighbor.

The literature on alliance formation shows that the ideological and identity factors are not enough to explain the formation of alliances so it is interesting to look at this strategic shift of the UAE in terms of alliance partner and analyze it beyond the scope of the traditional realism theory of «balance of power» by bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia. We should indeed understand it through the new lens of the «opportunity balance».