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Between the Domestic and the International: Ideational Factors, Peacebuilding and Foreign Policy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue examines post-2011 dynamics and the plethora of changes in the regional and domestic order in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. It argues that ideational factors are instrumental in both the building of peace and the construction of threats. Consequently, ideational factors are constitutive in inciting or pacifying cases of tension and conflict. Departing from the inherent connection between the domestic and the international, the Special Issue analyses the reconfiguration of the region through the lens of possibilities rather than impediments and centres on the role of ideational factors in foreign policy and their impact on peacebuilding in the region.

KEYWORDS

ideational factors; foreign policy; peacebuilding; Middle East; Persian Gulf

Since the Arab Uprisings of 2011, the countries of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, a region replete with a multiplicity of ideas and beliefs, have been witnessing significant changes in the regional and domestic order that entailed reconfigurations of the balance of power at a regional and domestic level. The changes but also the resistance to regional arrangements is evident in a number of ongoing conflicts and instances of tension with and without military intervention, such as the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia or the 2017 Qatar crisis. In this context, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, long regarded as important regional actors, have now come to be widely considered the major powers of the region. Meanwhile, other regional actors, such as Oman and Kuwait or institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have come to occupy important positions as regards the exercise of diplomacy and mediation to ease tensions and resolve conflicts.

This Special Issue examines the current regional dynamics by focusing on the role of ideational factors in these actors' foreign policies and their impact on peacebuilding in the region. With ideational factors playing an important role in foreign policy, our Special Issue departs from the notion that ideational factors are instrumental in both the building of peace and the construction of threats, and are therefore fundamental contributors to endeavours of peace, stability and security (see, for example, Darwich 2019; Gause 2003; Rubin 2014). Consequently, ideational factors are considered to be constitutive in inciting or pacifying cases of tension and conflict (see also Barnett 1998; Telhami and Barnett 2002; Jackson 2009). The articles in this Special Issue collectively

highlight possibilities for but also, simultaneously, possible obstacles to peacebuilding as well as the impact on regional stability and security. The Special Issue thereby moves away from an often employed focus on war and conflict, and instead endeavours to approach the region through the lens of possibilities rather than impediments. Such analysis is indispensable if we are to move beyond essentialist assumptions about the Middle East and Persian Gulf region.

Furthermore, this Special Issue highlights how domestic politics influences foreign policy and *vice versa*. While International Relations (IR) in Middle East scholarship has valued the "centrality of domestic factors long before attention to domestic politics and decision-making in IR theories" (Darwich and Kaarbo 2019), the discipline is still hesitant to fully recognise the interdependence of domestic politics and foreign policy. In their analyses of the international dimension, the collection of articles consequently departs from the domestic political arena and analyses the role of ideational factors in foreign policy and their impact on regional peace, stability and security.

Timewise, the focus of the Special Issue lies on a post-Arab Uprisings Middle East and Persian Gulf region. It particularly centres on the abovementioned influential regional actors, that is, the Islamic Republic of Iran (Glombitza and Zaccara 2021, this Special Issue; Ahmadian 2021, this Special Issue), Saudi Arabia (Dazi-Héni 2021, this Special Issue; Mabon, Nasirzadeh and Alrefai 2021, this Special Issue) and Turkey (Tank 2021, this Special Issue; Battaloglu 2021, this Special Issue), as well as third parties that impact on key regional issues through diplomatic efforts and mediation such as Oman (Worrall 2021, this Special Issue) and Kuwait (Coates Ulrichsen 2021, this Special Issue), also taking into consideration the role of regional institutions such as the GCC (Hoetjes 2021, this Special Issue). Covering a broad range of topics, it provides an in-depth analysis of recent and current issues and developments from the inside out, that is, from domestic politics to regional and international politics.

While ideational factors are often awarded only a secondary role to the benefit of material factors, our Special Issue highlights their important role in the political dynamics of the region. Based on the respective analyses that each contribution puts forward, the Special Issue overall is particularly interested in offering an illumination of possibilities for, rather than obstacles to, peacebuilding; the impact on regional stability and security; as well as potential avenues forward or circumstances that may change the highlighted dynamics in the long- and/ or short-term, and what lessons can and should be learned for a better understanding of the region. With this approach, the Special Issue aims to contribute to important debates on the reconfiguration of the domestic and regional order from an ideational perspective and in IR scholarship. Accordingly, it will be a valuable resource for both a research and policy-interested audience who will be able to draw on the forward-looking analysis of each article, tying in past and current, domestic, regional as well as international circumstances with future outlooks for the region and its international relations.

The following section situates the Special Issue in the wider context of IR scholarship on the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. The section thereafter elaborates on a key theme of the Special Issue, that is, the inextricable link between the domestic and the international as well as that between domestic politics and foreign policy. This is pursued by a section engaging with the three focal points of the Special Issue: ideational factors,

peacebuilding and foreign policy. The next section connects these focal points with the collection of articles in this Special Issue and presents each contribution, followed by a conclusion.

IR and the Middle East and Persian Gulf region

No discipline or region can lay claim to possessing the sole right to knowledge production. Nevertheless, the ongoing and vibrant debate regarding the so-called Area Studies Controversy (ASC),[1] which provides insights into a perceived "significant intellectual gulf that divided International Relations (IR) theory and the study of international relations of the Middle East" (Darwich 2021, 637), has shown that matters are not as clear-cut as they would seem. To bridge the divide, numerous scholars who are engaged with both scholarship on IR and the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have advocated dialogue and cross-fertilisation between the disciplines (Gause 1999; Gerges 1991; Tessler *et al.* 1999; Teti 2007; Valbjørn 2003; Darwich and Kaarbo 2019). Indeed, based on the scrutiny of the scholarship of the past two decades, May Darwich (2021, 637–8) points out that "a different direction is being taken, as IR and the ME are increasingly engaged in serious interchanges, which manifested in publications of sophisticated analyses and studies that combine IR theories with rich empirical analyses". Nonetheless, more remains to be done as "[d]espite this engagement, dialogue between IR and IRME remains unidirectional, where the interchange has been limited to theory application and adaptation, and the Middle East has hardly contributed to 'universal' theories that travel beyond regional confines" (ibid.).

Moreover, another point of contention has been mainstream IR's reluctance to recognise the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy and *vice versa*. While IR in Middle East scholarship has long valued the centrality of domestic factors (Darwich and Kaarbo 2019, 11), conventional IR is yet to follow suit with a similarly strong conviction. Whether this is for ideological or structural reasons, the result is a missed opportunity to draw on knowledge and lessons learnt through the study of domestic politics and societies of regions such as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. To the contrary, the discipline is still dominated by academia from and about the Global North, and more scholarship building on inclusivity and dialogue is indeed needed. Accordingly, the collection of articles in this Special Issue departs from the premise of the inherent interconnectedness of the domestic and the international realm to consider how domestic politics influences foreign policy and *vice versa*, and to further highlight how domestic challenges are mitigated through foreign policy endeavours.

Significantly, the articles are grounded in long-term and in-depth research of the Middle East and Persian Gulf region conducted by scholars of various backgrounds, coming from various institutions from inside and outside of the region. Our contributors have a deep knowledge and understanding of the countries they are writing about and are

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[1]The ASC "refers to a tension between Area Studies and Social Science discipline-oriented scholars about how to study different regions of the world. The ASC evolved as a tradition of debating and contesting whether the Middle East and its international relations is a region 'like no other' or 'like any other' [Valbjørn 2004]; whether regional dynamics can best be studied through the lens of general IR theories, or IR theories with their Western origins are not suited to examine the region, and finally to what extent can the Middle East contribute to theory development in International Relations" (Darwich 2021, 637).

able to provide country- and region-specific first-hand accounts through the lens of the country they are researching, thus providing refreshing and alternative perspectives.[2] If we are to better understand the international, in terms of the domestic-international nexus, the complexity of ideational factors and the role of history, Area Studies is crucial. Area Studies is also essential if we are to move towards a more global IR discipline. For a little over ten years, a vibrant debate has taken place among scholars of IR regarding the extent to which a discipline that claims to examine international relations worldwide is indeed global (Acharya 2014; Acharya and Buzan 2010; Tickner 2011; Tickner and Waever 2009). This failure to address the globe is evident in IR's marginalisation of "those outside the core countries of the West" (Acharya 2014, 647). Indeed, it has been contended that mainstream IR "has been built as an extension of imperial concerns" and that the "IR theories and methods developed by western scholars have not been able to explain the realities of those in the periphery" (Deciancio 2016, 106). In fact, it is not uncommon for conventional IR to view non-West or Global South regions such as the Middle East and Persian Gulf in essentialist terms. In response to IR's reluctant and slow incorporation of the non-West, Amitav Acharya (2014, 647) put forward the idea of a Global IR that must aim to transcend "the divide between the West and the Rest". This includes "integrating the study of regions and area studies" (ibid.). Consequently, in a Global IR, regions are at the centre of attention (Deciancio 2016, 107). Louise Fawcett (2020, 181–2) observes, however, that "[i]t is not enough simply to embrace and celebrate diversity acknowledging the roles of non-West". She proposes that "[f]irst, terms like non-West should be dropped; second, the roles and performances of all world regions need to be re-evaluated and incorporated into a more egalitarian and global IR narrative".

In consequence, it is necessary to take steps towards a Global IR that moves beyond critiquing IR's failure to appreciate IR's "deeply Western-centric character" (Hurrell 2016, 149). Certainly, in the case of the Middle East, scholars have noted the lack of "cross-fertilization between IR theories and region-focused analyses" (Darwich and Kaarbo 2019; see also Teti 2007). Thus, in doing Global IR, avenues must be sought to move beyond the disciplinary boundaries that are also enforced and exacerbated by Higher Education structures, teaching programmes and the focus of journals. So, the question remains of how regions and Area Studies can be brought into IR. The contention here is that, in IR fora, there needs to be a willingness to engage with empirical research that is grounded in Area Studies. It is also contended that IR needs to understand the complexity of regions. It cannot be assumed that dynamics within a region can be reduced to one characteristic.

While Middle East Studies faced a crisis in the early 2000s because of the apparent disregard for the benefits of Area Studies in IR (Teti 2007), engagement with Middle East politics is necessary for the realisation of a Global IR. In so doing, crucial steps can be made towards appreciating the intricacies of regions such as the Middle East and including them in debates about the nature of the international. Furthermore, in-depth analyses that are grounded in Area Studies are necessary for moving beyond Orientalist understandings of the Middle East. Area Studies allows us to better understand the

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[2]André Bank and Jan Busse (2021, 9) point to a "growing awareness of the 'geopolitics of knowledge', as Hazbun [2013] has described the importance to take into account the positionality and identity of the researcher observing the region [Valbjörn, 2017]".

historical, sociological and political contexts for a state's foreign policy and construction of the international. This makes it possible to move away from viewing the Middle East in essentialist terms as inherently conflict-ridden and unstable because of religion and/or ethnicity or as lacking political agency. While religion and ethnicity play a role in the domestic and international politics of the region's states, it must not be *assumed* that sectarianism, ethnic conflict or indeed terrorism are the basis of domestic political orders, foreign policy and regional dynamics.

In line with a spirit of dialogue and cross-fertilisation, our Special Issue actively engages in the exchange between IR and Area Studies, which we consider to be both vibrant and fluid. To this end, the contributions to the Special Issue continue to underline the importance of exchange and the realities of interdependence of IR and Middle East and Persian Gulf Studies. In doing so, the contributions emphasise that maintaining this interaction is important in order to resist "disciplinary divides and silos" (Fawcett 2020, 178). Working at the intersection of IR and Area Studies is, as Louise Fawcett reminds us, "both eclectic and interdisciplinary, combining as it does the rich contextual analysis of Area Studies with the cross-cutting logics of IR theories and approaches" (179–80).

In this sense, our Special Issue includes an ample collection of empirical research focused on the Middle East and Persian Gulf region, which is interested in promoting further dialogue between the IR discipline and region-embedded research and seeks to contribute to a better overall understanding of the region.

Connecting domestic politics and foreign policy

The connections between domestic politics and foreign policy have always been strong in a region that has experienced intense periods of transnational linkages at both a supra- and a sub-state level. The impact of Arab nationalism and political Islam on the political landscape in the Gulf is well-known, and there have long been close links between regionwide scholarly and political networks as well (Takriti 2016; Freer 2018). Groups as varied in time, place and political content as the Movement of Arab Nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s and the *Shiraziyyun* networks in the 1970s and 1980s became deeply embedded in the domestic social and political fabric of Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular (Louër 2008). Works by Morten Valbjørn and others have, moreover, extended scholarly analysis of the conceptual shifts in regional politics in the 2010s as issues such as sectarianisation have come increasingly to dominate much popular and practitioner discourse, especially since the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the so-called "Arab Spring" and its aftermath in 2011 (Hashemi and Postel 2017; Valbjørn, 2021).

In recent decades, the use of the term 'intermestic' to denote the interconnections between the domestic and the international level of policy has become increasingly common, although less so in scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa than elsewhere. Regional scholarship has nevertheless focused on the intimate links between the domestic and the international spheres of policymaking. Anoushiravan Ehteshami (2007) has drawn attention to the fact that the transnational aspects of Islam challenge the primacy of the nation-state, which itself has, in many parts of the region, had less than a century to become embedded as the central reference point for political authority. Fred

Halliday (2005), meanwhile, argued cogently that scholarship on the Middle East in IR must incorporate analysis of state, order and society as core components of the regional political and sociological reality.

Among scholars of regional affairs, and specifically of issues in the Gulf (defined broadly including Iraq and Iran as well as Yemen), the concept of "omni-balancing" has been refined by Gerd Nonneman (2005) to examine how ruling elites in Gulf states take into consideration threats (and interests) from both internal and external sources in crafting policy responses. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2009; 2011) similarly has examined how policymakers in Gulf capitals view the distinction between the internal and external dimensions of "security" and how these relate to each other, as well as to broader conceptual definitions of "security for whom". Abdulla Baaboud (2003) focused on analysing the linkages between domestic and foreign policy in creating what he colloquially termed "wriggle room" for the smaller Gulf states in the international system, not least through the pursuit of complementary relationships with more conventionally powerful partner states. More recently, Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid Almezaini (2016) have argued that foreign and security policy analysis of the Gulf states must integrate the examination of structural factors with domestic perceptions of those factors.

Since the turn of the millennium, the six Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, but also including Kuwait and Oman in the fields of diplomatic mediation and facilitation, have developed increasingly assertive roles in regional politics and policymaking. Beginning in the 1990s but accelerating in the 2000s, GCC states became more deeply enmeshed in international debates on issues such as energy governance and reforms to the global financial architecture. Such interventions, to say nothing of the policy responses in Gulf capitals to the 2010–11 uprisings across much of the Middle East and North Africa, propelled the Gulf states into the regional and international arena in a qualitatively new manner, but on their own terms and in pursuit of their own specific sets of national interests.

State-centric visions, rather than any attachment to normative concepts, have led policymakers in GCC capitals to project their interests regionally in part to bolster their (perceived) position domestically. This makes the study of the connections between domestic politics and foreign policy the more urgent given Gulf states' visibility and role in shaping the pace and direction of broader regional developments, especially since 2011. It also strengthens the case for studying the ideational factors bound up in peacebuilding and foreign policy decision-making in the Middle East and North Africa, given the GCC states' increased role in regional developments, as well as the likelihood that they will be expected to assist in (eventual) post-conflict reconstruction and recovery projects in conflict zones across the region such as Yemen, Libya and, potentially, Syria.

Ideational factors, peacebuilding and foreign policy

In addition to being among the first to identify the necessity of dialogue between the domestic and the international as crucial, scholarship on the Middle East and the Persian Gulf has also recognised the influence of ideational factors on political dynamics and pioneered the study of the ideational dimension as a gateway to a more profound understanding of the region long before it found wider consideration in IR (Valbjørn and Lawson 2015). According to Valbjørn and Lawson, approaching the region from

a position that is "neither 'blinded by' nor 'blind to' the influence of various identities and ideas on the dynamics of Middle East international relations" enables the study of questions about when, where and how identities and ideas matter and also "to what extent this can be grasped by general IR theories if these are applied in a more context-sensitive way and sometimes 'twisted' a bit" (xv). A number of contributions, some of which have meanwhile become seminal works of reference, have successfully connected Middle East scholarship with IR (see for example Barnett 1998; Telhami and Barnett 2002; Valbjørn and Lawson 2015; Darwich 2019; Hintz 2018; Warnaar 2013).

Departing from the domestic political arena as an important vantage point, the Special Issue is interested in the role of ideational factors such as identity and ideology in the region's foreign relations and the wider implications for endeavours of regional peace, stability and security. It thereby unites three different research foci in IR, that is, ideational factors, peacebuilding and foreign policy. Connecting ideational factors and foreign policy, Raymond Hinnebusch has pointed out that two streams of thought coexist. On the one hand, in line with constructivist convictions, identity shapes the perceptions of interest in foreign policymaking; on the other hand, in line with realist convictions, identity may also serve as an instrument in the pursuit of such interests. Identity, and ideology for that matter, become a "normative 'soft power', both instrumentally used by elites in their power contests and a constraint on their options". This means that "if identity shapes what states want to do or tr[y] to do in the short term, material capabilities and constraints, largely outside their own control, determine what, in the longer term, they actually can accomplish" (Hinnebusch 2016, 163–4).

Influencing perception and representation, ideational factors may act as unifying or dividing forces by strengthening or complicating relations and by facilitating or constraining foreign policy endeavours. In contrast to material factors, ideology and identity are part of a symbolic dimension that comprises ideas, norms and values, and influence the perception and understanding of the self as well as others. In this sense, both concepts relate to an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006) bound together by shared beliefs. Teun Van Dijk (2013) understands ideologies as systems of shared fundamental beliefs and ideas of a specific group and its members. These beliefs may include ideas about a group's identity, its activities, goals, norms and values, its relations with other groups and its resources (177–8). According to Valbjørn and Lawson (2015, xvi), "identities and ideas give meaning to actors' realities not only by providing answers to basic questions about 'who we are,' 'who are they' and 'where are we,' but also by defining what is (un)thinkable, (im)possible and (il)legitimate given a certain identity". In this sense, different identities and ideas have important stakes in the perception of threats and, therefore, in questions of (in)security and (in)stability.

However, these beliefs and ideas are not necessarily shared by the whole sociocultural community, and these differences of opinion may result in their contestation by groups of different ideological convictions (Van Dijk 2013, 177). Domestic and international struggles over identity are cases in point. Departing from the position that identities are not innate but rather socially constructed and shaped in the interaction with others, political actors play an important role in creating, shaping and reshaping identities in the long term. In this sense, according to Morten Valbjørn and Fred Lawson (2015, xiii), "all identities are moreover assumed to be changeable and in need of continuous reproduction". As the circumstances demand, different identities are invoked to contest

competing identity proposals, consolidate a certain identity to reach a dominant position or appeal to other groups. Lisel Hintz's (2018) inside-out theory of identity contestation, for example, connects the domestic struggles for power with identity contestation through foreign policy on the international stage. Foreign policy becomes, therefore, an alternative arena for domestic struggles over identity. This highlights the reciprocal connection with domestic politics as a conditioning factor for foreign policy behaviour.

In studying the role of ideational factors in domestic as well as foreign policy, discourse plays an important role in this Special Issue. Indeed, discourse is significant in the production, expression and reproduction of ideologies (Van Dijk 2013, 175), and also identities. Ideologies and identities are therefore inherently discursive and are similarly "constituted in social interaction via communication and discourse" (Wodak 2009, 13). Discourse, in turn, is a form of social practice and is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Relating this to foreign policy, foreign policy discourse therefore gives "meaning to the outside world and the positions, interests, and interactions of the self and the other in the international system" (Moshirzadeh 2007, 522).

Ideational factors, peacebuilding and foreign policy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf

The contributions in this Special Issue build on an eclectic theoretical and methodological framework. They share, however, the same epistemological and ontological assumptions. As such, they consider, but are not limited to, the analysis of high-impact inter-state conflicts and instances of tension with and without military intervention, such as the wars in Yemen and Syria and the 2017 Gulf crisis and subsequent developments. Given that instances of conflict are regarded as organising principles, the contributions also address how identity and ideology are instrumental in possible outcomes such as the formation of new alliances, the rupture of old ones and possibilities for a rapprochement between conflicting or rivalling states. Contributions also include an examination of different ways and initiatives of engagement as well as a range of foreign policy tools, such as diplomacy and mediation, humanitarian and development aid. The role of ideational factors in peacebuilding is furthermore explored through examining their instrumentality in foreign policy discourse, that is, the employment of communicative discursive strategies. Such strategies include, for example, the discursive construction of 'the self' and 'the other'; consensus building; legitimation of actions; promotion and safeguarding of interests; image building; power projection; the exertion of influence, etc. While the focus lies on ideational factors, material factors play an equally important role in foreign policy considerations and are therefore also examined in connection to, as well as in contrast to ideational factors. Consequently, the collection includes a reflection on the relation and tension between ideational and material factors.

Olivia Glombitza and Luciano Zaccara (2021, this Special Issue) examine the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran through an Iranian lens that explores Iran's initiatives of constructive engagement with the GCC. Their contribution argues that, despite the often perceived rigidity of its ideology and inflammatory rhetoric, Iran's foreign policy is inherently pragmatic. The article offers an alternative perspective on the Islamic Republic and its relations with GCC states, by contributing a comprehensive

study of Iran's discursive and practical initiatives of constructive engagement towards the GCC countries during Rouhani's presidency through the Iranian lens. This includes concrete initiatives such as "World Against Violence and Extremism" (WAVE) and the "Hormuz Peace Endeavor" (HOPE), as well as strategies of discursive persuasion aimed at building confidence and improving Iran's legitimacy and its relations with GCC states.

Hassan Ahmadian (2021, this Special Issue) explores how ideational factors shape Iran's foreign policy through an examination of the principles of dignity, wisdom and expediency. Ahmadian argues that the weight of ideational factors has always been felt on Iran's foreign policy processes as it has often outweighed that of material factors in driving Iran's strategic calculus. Ever since 1979, the revolutionary state identity focused on keeping the country independent and directed its foreign policy continuum of enmity and amity accordingly. As the centrepiece of Iranian foreign policy enactment and framing, independence brought ideational factors into its processes. A close look into the past four decades suggests that strategic proportionality – based on the aforementioned principles of dignity, wisdom and expediency – vis-à-vis rivals and foes drove much of Iran's foreign policy conduct, connecting ideational and material factors.

Fatiha Dazi-Héni (2021, this Special Issue) analyses how the radical transformation of the Saudi Kingdom underway since early 2015 has produced unparalleled changes in foreign policies. Her article illustrates how domestic decision-making factors affect actors' choices in foreign policy, contributing to the theoretical debate that integrates foreign policy analysis into IR theory. The assertive policy stance under King Salman and his heir, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has revealed tensions arising from their divergent world vision. This has resulted in an incoherent behaviour and subsequent downgrading of Saudi regional leadership. Saudi attempts to appease regional tensions, especially following the election of Joe Biden as US President in November 2020, even though positive for stability in the Middle East and North Africa, are unlikely to curb in the short term the inconsistencies inherent in an authoritarian governance that in turn affects a weakened Saudi regional leadership.

Simon Mabon, Samira Nasirzadeh and Eyad Alrefai (2021, this Special Issue) examine the future of Saudi-Iranian relations through the lenses of de-securitisation and pragmatism in the Persian Gulf. They argue that, since 1979, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have oscillated between periods of overt hostility and apparent rapprochement, yet since 2003 the two have engaged in a vitriolic competition that has spread across regional affairs, to devastating effect in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen. Central to much of this are efforts to securitise the other to external audiences, discursively presenting the rivalry in the language of security. However, despite the two countries presenting competing claims to Islamic legitimacy and leadership, there are strong pragmatic reasons for them to engage with one another. Driven by political and economic concerns – notably around Saudi Arabia meeting Vision 2030 targets and Iran circumventing the damage done by the sanctions regime – the two states could gain more from working with one another rather than being rivals. Underpinning this, however, is a need to engage in de-securitisation moves, reducing tensions between the two through framing relations in terms of 'normal' politics rather than the language of security.

Pinar Tank (2021, this Special Issue) explores tensions in Turkey's Syria policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This contribution analyses how the ruling AKP government in Ankara has, since 2011, sought to profile Turkey as an emerging humanitarian

and peacebuilding power, mobilising the country's diplomatic and foreign policy resources to project the AKP's vision of Turkey's Islamic identity through its duty to help. Tank examines the state's humanitarian and peacebuilding policies as they have evolved in the Syrian conflict through official narratives and discusses the tensions between a state security approach based on the AKP government's perceived national security needs and a human security approach aimed at projecting Turkey as a normative humanitarian power.

Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu (2021, this Special Issue) examines the ideational factors in Turkey's alignment with Qatar and their impact on regional security. She argues that Turkey and Qatar have developed exceptionally cordial relations and aligned their foreign policies on many regional issues. In the 2017 Gulf crisis, Turkey quickly aligned with Qatar to alleviate Doha's physical and political isolation, despite the risks of incurring material losses and sacrificing relations with blockading countries. This contribution argues that ideational elements and norms play a crucial role in Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar, analyses what the ideational foundations of this relationship are, and explores the implications of the ideational basis of Turkey's alliance with Qatar on regional security amid intra-Sunni disputes.

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2021, this Special Issue) examines the record of Kuwaiti mediation in regional affairs through the two Gulf Crises of 2014 and 2017–21. Kuwait has developed and earned a reputation as a mediator in regional affairs as leadership-level conceptions of 'national' and 'regime' security have intersected with pragmatic assessments of the benefits any such mediation would bring to Kuwait's regional interests. As a small state in a volatile neighbourhood, such calculations have been accorded greater policy-making priority than any ideational attachment to mediation. Kuwait's experience is nevertheless worthy of closer study for the lessons that can be drawn for other small states, especially those in the Gulf, which share broadly similar attributes to Kuwait in style of decision-making and the careful balancing of competing regional pressures.

Moving from Kuwait to Oman, the alleged "Switzerland of Arabia", James Worrall (2021, this Special Issue) analyses Omani foreign policy and mediation efforts in the Middle East. Oman has developed a reputation as a key facilitator of mediation in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, especially with the successful completion of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Offering the first systematic study of Omani mediation practices in the region, bringing together all known mediations to develop a typology to better detect patterns, Worrall roots Muscat's mediation within the Sultanate's wider foreign policy. Mediation is enabled by the Omani approach to foreign policy and increasingly serves to reinforce that foreign policy, but this was not an inevitable strategy. Overall, it furthers the central goals of preserving both Oman's independent foreign policy and the Sultanate's sovereignty and security.

Finally, Gertjan Hoetjes (2021, this Special Issue) examines the role of the GCC and the possibilities for peacebuilding in Yemen. Hoetjes notes that the GCC states, due to increasing self-confidence and encouragement by Western powers, have gained a prominent role in multilateral efforts around peacebuilding in Yemen from 2004 onwards. Based on Johan Galtung's "negative and positive peace framework", this contribution argues that the lack of focus on the part of the GCC states on advancing "positive peace" in the country as well as disagreements among the Gulf monarchies, which were heightened by hyper-nationalist tendencies, constitute an obstacle for the GCC and inhibit the organisation from playing a more effective role in regard to peacebuilding in Yemen.

Conclusion

With its focus on ideational factors at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy and its intention to highlight possibilities rather than impediments for current and future developments, the Special Issue offers an innovative approach beyond essentialist narratives of a war- and conflict-stricken Middle East and Persian Gulf region.

It examines regional dynamics and the reconfiguration of the domestic and regional order, while at the same time pointing to possibilities in the spirit of peacebuilding arising from pragmatic considerations, which in turn open up further avenues for regional and international engagement with a positive impact on regional stability and security.

The Special Issue therefore demonstrates that ideational factors are indispensable instruments in domestic and foreign policy. On the one hand, they play an important role when it comes to inciting hostility and violence as well as the construction of threats. On the other hand, and importantly, they are crucial requisites for pacifying instances of tension and conflict, the building of peace and the creation of stability and security on a domestic, regional as well as international level. The Special Issue thus depicts a region that tries to navigate a wide array of oftentimes rapid domestic and external changes, challenges and developments.

Together, the contributions to the Special Issue endeavour to add an optimistic piece to the puzzle and increase our understanding of socio-political issues in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region, providing important take-aways for regional and international relations from an ideational perspective.

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