Ideational and Material Forces in Threat Perception

The Divergent Cases of Syria and Saudi Arabia during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)[1]

Abstract

How do states perceive threats? Why are material forces sometimes more prominent in shaping threat perceptions, whereas ideational forces are the motivator in other instances? This article aims to move beyond the task of determining whether material or ideational factors matter to offer an integrated framework based on analytical eclecticism that specifies the conditions under which one of these two factors become salient in regimes' threat perception. When regime identity is fixed and the material structure provides multiple strategic options to ensure a state's physical security, leaders perceive challenges to their identity as more salient. When their identity is fluid providing multiple narratives and the distribution of military capabilities constrain strategic options for physical security, leaders perceive threats to their physical security as more prominent. As a result, the regime's identity narrative is reframed to adapt to the constraints of the material structure. To examine the validity of this argument, I analyse the divergent Syrian and Saudi threat perceptions during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

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INTRODUCTION

The Iranian Revolution (1979) stands as one of the most important events of modern Middle Eastern history; it brought normative and structural changes to the region. Following the revolution, Iran's military capabilities significantly declined whereas Iraq's military power nearly doubled reflecting Saddam Hussein's regional ambitions. Meanwhile, the Islamic revolution attempted to export its message across the region, constituting an ideational challenge to its neighbours. With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Arab states made different alliance choices based on divergent perceptions of these ideational and material threats. Whereas Syria perceived Iraq as an emerging military threat and allied with Iran, Saudi Arabia perceived Iran's new identity narrative as more threatening and allied with Iraq. These diametrically opposite decisions are one of the most intriguing puzzles in Middle Eastern politics. Whereas traditional realist explanations account for Syria's threat perception, they fall short of explaining the Saudi decision. Although both Saudi Arabia and Syria share geographic proximity with Iraq, the Saudis did not perceive Iraq as a threat. Many ideational explanations examine Saudi threat perception through the fear of the diffusion of revolutionary ideas emanating from Iran. This explanation does not, however, explain why Syria—a secular Ba'athist regime oppressing Islamic movements—did not fear Iran's revolutionary narrative. This article examines these two cases for the purpose of better understanding the ideational and material forces influencing state behavior. .

Although threat perception has been a cornerstone in the study of alliances in the Middle East, the empirical puzzle of Syrian and Saudi threat perceptions reveals some gaps in the existing literature. There is evidence that identity shapes a regime's threat perception in systematic ways, but that materialist considerations, such as the distribution of military capabilities, are also fundamental. My aim, therefore, is not to show that ideational factors override other material factors or vice versa. Instead, this article relies on analytical eclecticism to examine the conditions under which either material or ideational forces dominate a state's

threat perception..I examine threat perception as a process that leads to various foreign policy behaviour, such as identity reframing, resource mobilization, and alliance formation or consolidation. Whereas previous work[2] has dealt with threat perception as a discreet event that precedes alliance decisions, I show how thinking of it as a process as analytical eclecticism suggests allows us to understand the relationship between states' material capabilities and identity narratives in specific moments.

States can fear for their physical security but also for their identity. Just as an an unfavorable distribution of military capabilities might endanger their physical security, other identity narratives can threaten a state's domestic stability. If the narrative of a state's identity related to its raison d'être is challenged, domestic rifts can emerge Sometimes states can perceive threats to their identity as more prominent, whereas material forces dominate in other instances. In some cases, the distribution of military capabilities presents several strategic policy options ensuring physical security, and a state's identity narrative is fixed. In these situations leaders should perceive threats to their identity as more salient. Accordingly, regimes aim to reinforce their self-identities by framing their preferred courses of action in those identity terms. I claim that this was the case of Saudi Arabia during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Material forces, on the other hand, are likely to dominate threat perceptions under two conditions: (1) identities are fluid and several identities co-exist, and (2)the regimes face a distribution of military capabilities with limited policy options ensuring physical security. In this situation, leaders perceive threats to their physical security as more prominent. Henceforth, the regime identity undergoes a process of adaptation to conform to material security needs. More specifically, the material interest is likely to determine which identity narrative is selected. I claim that Syria's case demonstrates this pathway.

In the following, I first discuss conventional explanations for threat perception in Middle Eastern international relations. Second, I present the conceptual framework clarifying how

[2] Cf. Goodarzi (2006) and Ryan (2009).

ideational and material factors can be threatening. I then develop a theoretical argument on the conditions under which ideational or material forces dominate threat perception. Afterwards, the empirical part of the article analyzes the divergent Saudi and Syrian threat perceptions during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

THEORIZING THREAT PERCEPTION

THE REDUCTIONISM OF NEOREALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Threat perception is often defined as an actor's perception of anticipated harm based on the combination of perceived intentions and capabilities (Singer 1958; Knorr 1976; Cohen 1978). The question of how states assess threats is subject to debate between those favoring material factors and those supporting ideational ones. Whereas realism posits that material capabilities are the most important, constructivists emphasize that identities and ideas matter more. With this reductionism, both realism and constructivism fail to explain why states, facing similar material and/or ideational threats, diverge in their perceptions.

According to realism, structural factors—such as shifts in the distribution of military capabilities—create external military threats. For both classical (e.g., Morgenthau 1948) and structural realists (e.g., Waltz 1979), asymmetries of power are the ultimate source of threat perception. This approach considers ideational factors—state identity, ideology, and intentions—to be secondary or even reductionist. Stephan Walt's *The Origins of Alliance* presents a refinement of neorealism's heavy reliance on material factors. He argues that threat is a function of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. Although Walt adds "aggressive intentions" as a source of threats, this ideational perspective remains untheorized. As Goldgeier (1997, 141) points out, Walt "argues for the importance of perceptions, beliefs, motivation, and bias while leaving the origins of these factors to case-by-case empirical study rather than systematic theoretical investigation." Realism, therefore, explains the divergence in threat perception even though states are facing similar

material power distribution. To illustrate, although Iraq emerged as a military threat in 1979, Syria and Saudi Arabia diverged on perceiving it as such.

The constructivist approach in international relations examines the phenomenon of threat perception differently.[3] Threats are not objective, materially based facts; threats are social constructions. Identities and ideas play a crucial role in creating social facts; identities and material interests are co-constituted. For example, Barnett (1996, 1998) argues that identity provides a better conceptual lens to threat perception than material factors. By examining Arab politics in the 1950s and 1960s, Barnett argues that Arab regimes are threatened when a competing transnational narrative of pan-Arabism challenges their legitimacy and sovereignty. From Barnett's perspective, identities and norms are in constant change through interaction with others, which led to the demise of pan-Arabism. In the same vein, Owen (2010) argues that competing ideologies at the international level can threaten states, as it challenges their stability and legitimacy. Similarly, Gause (2003) offers an important corrective attempt of both neorealist and constructivist accounts of threat perception. He shows that regimes balance against the greatest ideological threat. Rubin (2014) argues that symbolic ideas can be threatening as they can cause domestic instability and endanger regimes' security.

As neorealism treats ideational factors as epiphenomenal, constructivism considers material forces to be secondary (Hinnebusch 2003, 362). By treating material forces as dependent on ideational factors, constructivism cannot account for the divergence in states' perception of the same ideational threat. Although constructivism accounts for Saudi perception of Iran as an ideational threat, Syria's decision to align with Iran remains an enigma. As Gause (2003, 298) notes, "The [Ba'athist] regime in Damascus and the Islamic revolutionaries in Tehran had very little in common. [Ayatollah Khomeini] excoriated secular and nationalist regimes that suppressed local Islamic movements; the [Assad] regime was a prototype of such a

[3] Constructivism, here, refers to "thin" constructivism in International Relations, according to which social reality exists out there and can be accessed through empirical research (Wendt 1999).

regime." While threatening Saudi regime identity, the Islamic revolution constituted a similar challenge to Syria, and yet al-Assad chose to ally with Iran. In short, some ideas and identities seem to threaten some states but not others. Seen from this perspective, the Syrian decision to ally with Iran challenges ideational explanations. In an attempt to solve this anomaly, Haas (2012, xv) argues that threat perception is a function of what he calls "ideological distance" that is "the degree of ideological differences dividing states' leaders." He claims that ideological difference is a source of conflict among states . Although he acknowledges the ideological schism between Syria and Iran, he argues that ideological multipolarity can temper the effect of ideological differences. Accordingly, a common ideological enemy—Zionism—created incentives for cooperation between these two states. This argument fails, however, to account for the animosity between the two Ba'athist regimes in Iraq and Syria despite their ideological similarity and the presence of common ideological enemies, namely Zionism and the Islamic Revolution. In short, neither realism nor constructivism can account for the divergence in Saudi and Syrian threat perceptions. By focusing on either ideational or material factors, the existing literature has failed to specify the conditions under which ideational or material factors predominate in regimes' threat perception.

COMBINING IDEATIONAL AND MATERIAL FORCES

AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The following conceptual framework examines three theoretical issues. I, first, present analytical eclecticism as the overarching approach of this study. I, then, present a rigorous definition of material and ideational forces as well as their respective effect on threat perception. Afterwards, I present the conditions under which either ideational or material forces dominate threat perception.

Before proceeding, I need to answer an important question: who perceives and assesses the threat? This study focuses on threats perceived by regimes in the Middle East. The literature on democratic transition has made the distinction between state and regime. A regime is

defined as "the formal and informal organization of the centre of political power, and its relations with the broader society. A regime determines who has access to political power, and how those who in power deal with who are not" (Fishman 1990, 428). The state, however, is the most permanent structure of political domination, including coercive capacities and abilities to control the society. Although the distinction has been useful in examining cases in southern Europe and Latin America, the selected cases within the Middle East present a challenge to this distinction. The history of state formation in the Middle East is inextricably intertwined with regime power (Ayubi 1996; R. Owen 2004). As Longva (2000, 193) puts it, a Saudi notion of belonging "to a land or an 'imagined community' is unthinkable because the country itself is appropriated to the ruling family whose name it bears." In other words, state apparatuses in the Middle East have been co-opted, penetrated, and captured by authoritarian regimes (Anderson 1987, 7). Therefore, I provisionally use the terms "state" and "regime" in the Middle East interchangeably to signify the threat perception of the elite in power, which becomes diffused and transmitted to states' apparatuses.

1. Analytical Eclecticism

The puzzle of how threat is perceived cannot be solved with either material or ideational explanations, nor can it be addressed from within either domestic or regional contexts. Inspired by Katzenstein and Sil (2010, 10), this article adopts analytical eclecticism, which is defined as "any approach that seeks to extricate, translate, and selectively integrate analytic elements—concepts, logics, mechanisms, and interpretations—of theories or narratives that have been developed within separate paradigms but that address related aspects of substantive problems that have both scholarly and practical significance."

Although some international relations scholars have previously combined ideational and material forces in their studies of international and regional structures, some gaps remain to be filled. Barkin (2010) claims that constructivist research is compatible with the realist worldview, and both should not be considered as mutually exclusive. Based on his concept of

"realist constructivism," constructivism is a methodological approach illuminating the uses of power and the normative aspects of power. Similarly, Sørensen (2008) presents an understanding of the international structure and the modern state-system based on combining elements from neorealism and constructivism. While Wendt (1999, 110-111) increasingly emphasizes the importance of ideas, he endorses a "rump materialism" according to which material factors—such as material power distribution, geography, and technological capabilities—influence international structures. While most of these works have embraced a structural perspective, the interplay of ideational and material forces at the "unit" (i.e., agent) remains overlooked.[4] Against this backdrop, this article examines how ideational and material forces at international and domestic levels drive actors' threat perceptions and foreign policy choices.

I develop a two-layered framework of analysis where both elements operate following separate dynamics. I start from the assumption that states pursue both identity and physical security. Regimes hold identity narratives relating to their ideology, state history, and culture, but they also hold a quest for survival at the regional level (physical security). Although ideational and material forces have separate dynamics, I argue that both interact, and the arrows of interaction run both ways. Under certain conditions, identities can shape how regimes perceive material forces. Under other conditions, a change in the material factors can lead to gradual changes in the regime identity. Whereas constructivists consider identities and interests to be co-constituted, I treat identity as a factor that is analytically distinct from material factors (Kowert and Legro 1996). In some cases, states may uphold particular identity narratives because it is in their material interest to do so. States can also maintain identities that contradict their material interests, and it is for this reason that identities and material interests should remain conceptually and analytically distinct. As Hinnebusch (2003, 362) explains, "state interests and identity, are autonomous of each other, but stability depends on a correspondence between them… They can be in conflict, but where this is so, in time either norms and identity

[4] Only a few studies focused on actors' behavior—cf. Risse et al. (1999) and Nau (2002).

will likely stimulate revolts against material power structures perceived to be illegitimate, or they will be altered to conform to material interests and constraints."

2. Ideational and Material Forces and How They Affect Threat Perception

I define material factors as those related to "the capabilities or resources mainly military, with which states influence one another" (Wivel 2005, 368). Particularly, I focus on distribution of military capabilities as the primary material factor influencing threat perception. This term refers to the real distribution of capabilities, to which states adjust or fail to adapt. Although fundamental to generating threats, the distribution of material capabilities alone is insufficient to measure material power. For this reason, I draw a connection between a state's military power and its capabilities based on the logic of the offence–defence balance, which is defined as "a state's ability to perform the military missions that are required to successfully attack, deter, or defend" (Glaser and Kaufmann 1998, 48). Seen from this perspective, something is perceived as a material threat when it comes from a state that not only possesses military power, measured in terms of relative distribution, but that also has the capability to project it. Scholars of political psychology pay careful attention to the variance between what leaders perceive and what the evidence of military capabilities suggest (Jervis 1976; Stein 1988). Scholars have even highlighted the difficulty of how objective and subjective factors can influence the perception of the balance of power (Wohlforth 1993). Henceforth, the distribution of military capabilities and the offence-defence balance are indicators of this objective aspect.

The subjective dimension is inextricably related to ideational factors. Ideational factors include diverse elements such as culture, norms, values, beliefs, identity, and ideology. I, here, focus on identity. Drawing on Jepperson et al. (1996, 59), identity refers to "the image of individuality and distinctiveness (selfhood) held and projected by an actor." Accordingly, state identity is the result of two primary paths: current interactions between states (relational) and the characteristics that shape states' perceptions of the Self (individual). The first dimension of

state identity is relational, according to which a state's identity acquires meaning via its distinctiveness from significant others with whom states have constant interactions. Accordingly, Barnett (1999, 9) defines identity as "the understanding of oneself in relationship to others."

The second dimension of state identity is individual. Identity is about how a state perceives itself. State identity is, according to Wendt (1999, 224), "rooted in the actor's self-understanding." States can base their actions on religion, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, or on ideology, like the pan-Arab regimes in Syria or Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. This self-perception relies on domestic sources, and it is corroborated by the common belief that makes domestic groups aggregate their views around a particular institution (Nau 2002, 5). The domestic sphere is a pool that provides policy-makers with a menu of identities. Accordingly, the relational and domestic dimensions of state identity are not separable; rather, they interact and shape one another. The conception of regime identity used here is different from national identity, where nation and state overlap. I, therefore, define regime identity as the identity espoused by the dominant elite in power. This regime identity does not necessarily reflect the identity of a particular group in the society; the ruling elite provides a narrative about the state and its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other states in the international system (Telhami and Barnett 2002, 13-16).

To examine how identity shapes threat perception, I build on the assumption that states seek to affirm their self-identity and pursue foreign policies that highlight their distinctiveness from significant others. An ideational threat emerges when a particular set of ideas held and projected by the a significant other can challenge the state's identity narrative at the external and domestic levels. These ideational challenges can be as important as physical threats. Because the domestic and external spheres are interconnected, ideational challenges can pose an existential threat to the state, jeopardizing its narrative about the self vis-à-vis the other. If statesmen fail to maintain a consistent narrative about the state's identity and its *raison d'être*,

domestic rifts can ensue. In short, regime identity is threatened when the narrative about the state and its distinctiveness is challenged. This challenge can lead to identity insecurity, what some scholars termed as "ontological insecurity" (Steele 2005; Mitzen 2006). Mitzen (2006, 344) defines ontological security as "security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice." Accordingly, ontological insecurity can lead to the weakening of the regime narrative at the domestic levels. If the regime is unable to formulate a narrative of state's raison d'être, societal groups can be easily mobilized against the regime. The resulting sense of insecurity usually leads to policies, affirming and reinforcing the state's self-assigned identity, or in other words, its ontological security.

Regime identity provides leaders with opportunities and constraints, influencing their perception of threat. Students of nationalism and identity politics have observed that states can hold multiples identities (Young 1979; Laitin 1986; Horowitz 1995). This fluidity of identity provides leaders with the opportunity to activate and deactivate their identity narratives during certain social situations (Telhami and Barnett 2002, 13–15). For example, Sadowski (2002, 13–138) narrates how a Syrian officer can define himself in multiple ways: Arab, Ba'thi, Sunni/non-Sunni, member of a particular sect, and/or member of a tribe or family. Similarly, Karwan (2002, 156) argues that Egyptian foreign policy invoked various identities over time: Arab, Islamic, Middle Eastern, African, and Mediterranean. These examples highlight the intrinsic character of identity, which is fluidity. Social psychology scholars invariably emphasize the existence of multiple concepts of identity within an actor (Parsons 1968, 14–15; Turner 1968, 100–102). A particular context renders one particular identity more significant than other identities that simultaneously exist within a single actor. If regime's self identity is threatened upon the emergence of a competing narrative at the structural level, leaders can reframe and invoke other images of their identities to preserve their stability and legitimacy. Nevertheless, identity can also be a constraint on state behavior when it is fixed and incapable of being melded. Saudi Arabia presents an example of this constraint. In particular, the Saudi state identity became inextricably related to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (Nevo 1998). In this

case, identity threats become acute. As Abdelal et al. (2006) noted, measuring the fluidity of identity remains a challenging task, and it remains an empirical question. Therefore, I rely on discourse analysis, looking at speeches and statements focusing on the language that leaders use to describe their respective identity narrative. For the purpose of this study, I consider an identity to be fixed if a single identity is dominant and leaders cannot invoke other narratives. An identity is fluid when states have several identities and leaders can activate and deactivate these narratives.

3. Ideational and Material Forces: When Do They Matter?

States face ideational as well as material constraints and opportunities, which contributes to their threat assessments. There are four situations that impact the conditions under which identities shape material considerations in threat perception and vice versa.

In the first situation, state identity is fixed, and the distribution of military capabilities comes with limited policy options to ensure state's physical security. In this situation, state's security is endangered, and state identity is a constraining factor. If identity narrative converges with strategic policy ensuring physical security, then leaders would prioritize one or the other. In this case, the interplay between identity and material interest can go either way (←→). It is, therefore, hard to expect how states will perceive threats.

A second possibility is a situation where state identity is fixed and the distribution of military capabilities presents multiple policy options leading to debates among the ruling elite. In this situation, regimes will perceive threats to their identity as more eminent. Regimes will, therefore, attempt to reinforce their identity narrative. Under these circumstances, the dictates of the identity shapes the perception of material power distribution. Moreover, regimes are likely to frame their preferred course of action in terms of their respective identity narrative.

Regimes may also have multiple identity narratives, accompanied by a power distribution with limited policy choices for ensuring the state's physical security. In this third situation,

states perceive threats to their physical security as more eminent. In addition, the material interest is likely to determine which identity narrative is selected and carries the day within the regime narrative. The regime identity, henceforth, undergoes reframing and adjustment to accommodate these material constraints.

Finally, the last situation is when the distribution of military capabilities provides the state with multiple policy choices in its pursuit of physical security, and the regime also holds multiple identities. This situation provides elites with a freedom of maneuver in pursuing physical and identity security. It is, however, difficult to predetermine which factor identity narrative will connect with a particular policy option and which connection will prevail (←→). The empirical cases examined in this article apply to the second and third situations. The first and fourth situations provide intriguing areas for future research.

Physical Security	***Regime Identity***	
	Fixed Identity *(single identity)*	*Fluid Identity* *(multiple identities)*
Limited strategic policy choices	Identity ←→ Material Forces	Material Forces → Identity (the case of Syria)
Multiple strategic policy choices	Identity → Material forces (the case of Saudi Arabia)	Identity ←→ Material Forces

Figure (1): Ideational and Material Forces in Threat Perception

This conceptual framework helps make sense of the divergent Saudi and Syrian threat perceptions during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Although both Syria and Saudi Arabia share geographic proximity with Iraq and were both threatened by the message of the Islamic

revolution, Saudi Arabia perceived the ideational threat of the Islamic Revolution as prominent, whereas Syria considered Iraq's military threat as more salient. Through a "structured, focused comparison," [5] these case studies are examined as a plausibility probe for the above theoretical framework. Plausibility probe cases are used as a preliminary stage of inquiry to examine the potential validity of a theoretical argument prior to testing. As Eckstein (1991, 148) states, "a plausibility probe into theory may simply attempt to establish that a theoretical construct is worth considering at all."

In the remainder of this article, I examine why Saudi Arabia and Syria diverged in their threat perceptions, despite their shared vulnerability toward the message of the Islamic Revolution and their geographic proximity to Iraq. The Saudi case illustrates a situation where the state identity is fixed while the distribution of military capabilities presented multiple options. In this case, the leaders perceived the ideational challenge to be more salient. Under these conditions, identity delineated the realm of choices that the political elite regarded as being in their regime's material interest. The Syrian case illustrates a situation, where the regime identity included multiple narratives, and the distribution of military capabilities imposed threats emerging from Iraq's and Israel's military capabilities. These material constraints left the Syrian regime with limited policy options to ensure its physical security. Rather than shaping the perception of material power, the regime's identity was subject to reinterpretation to accommodate the material constraints.

SAUDI ARABIA

MULTIPLE STRATEGIC OPTIONS AND FIXED IDENTITY

[5] The method of "structured, focused comparison" is structured because the research examines each case by 'asking a set of standardized, general questions … these questions are carefully developed to reflect the research objective and theoretical focus of inquiry'. It is focused because it "deals only with specific aspects of the historical cases examined" (George and Bennett 2005, 67–69).

It may make sense to expect that states will rely on simplified rules, such as ignoring identity, especially when the regime's material security is endangered. However, this was not the case for Saudi Arabia during the Iran–Iraq War, when it supported an aspiring Iraq against a militarily weakened Iran. The external shock of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent change in the balance of power in favor of Iraq provided the Saudi Kingdom (henceforth the Kingdom) with multiple strategic options. Meanwhile, the Saudi regime's identity, which was fixed, played the dominant role in the regime's threat perception. As Saudi Arabia sought to distinguish its state identity from the Iranian pan-Islamic plea, the traditional component of this identity—Wahhabism—provided guidance and operated as a channel through which the elite perceived the distribution of military capabilities. The Saudi case illustrates the second situation in the theoretical framework, according to which identity is fixed and the distribution of military capabilities offered the ruling elite multiple policy options to ensure the Kingdom's physical security. Therefore, the elite perceived threats to identity as more eminent, which shaped their threat perception. To illustrate this argument, this section is divided into two parts. I, first, present the strategic conditions facing the Kingdom as a result of the Islamic Revolution. I, then, examine how identity risks emerged and framed Saudi threat perception.

1. The Strategic Balance of Power: "A Structure without an Instruction Sheet"[6]

Although the Saudi support for Iraq seemed assertive at the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War, the decision to provide this support was preceded by a long period of debate among the ruling elite, from roughly January 1979 to September 1980. Before 1979, Saudi Arabia was successful in pursuing separate and incompatible strategies in different areas: the Persian Gulf, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the partnership with the United States. In 1979, the political-military environment altered, and the Kingdom was facing challenges to its ideational and material security. The royal elite was, therefore, compelled to make new strategic choices to face these critical changes.

[6]This title is based on Blyth (2003).

In the Persian Gulf throughout the 1970s, Saudi Arabia maintained an a regional balance of powerallowing it a significant room to maneuver in the region by playing Iraq against Iran, and vice versa (Safran 1988, 265-280). The Islamic Revolution marked a change in the military power distribution leading to parity between Iran and Iraq. Ayatollah Khomeini's first act after seizing power in February 1979 was to deliberately destroy the Shah's[7] well-trained professional military, regarded as disloyal to the Islamic regime. Approximately 5,000 of the most experienced officers, mostly trained in the United States or Israel, were executed; thousands more were imprisoned or exiled (Segal 1988, 952–3). By some estimates, 30 to 59 percent of the highest-ranking officers, mainly majors and colonels, were killed. Iran's army in 1980 was about half of what it had been in 1979 (down from approximately 415,000 men to 240,000 men). Military spending fell from 15 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP) to 7.3 percent (Cashman and Robinson 2007, 279). By destroying its military capabilities, Iran could hardly threaten its neighbors.

Throughout the 1970s, Iraq, supported by the Soviet Union and profiting from the oil windfall, increased its military capabilities. By 1980, its military had doubled in size (to 242,000 men). In addition, its military spending jumped from 14 percent of GNP in 1972 to 21 percent in 1980. Hence, the military balance tilted towards parity between Iran and Iraq. Furthermore, Saddan Hussein attempted to capitalize on Iran’s waning influence in the region by asserting of its leadership in the broader Arab World.. Saudi Arabia was unable to utilize its old strategy of playing Iraq and Iran against one another. Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states were quite aware that Iran was not interested in war against its neighbors, including Iraq. Ahmad Abdulaziz al-Jassim, from the Kuwait Foreign Ministry, described the situation as follows:

> In April 1980, an attempt was made on Tariq ‘Aziz’s [the Iraqi foreign minister] life and there were some clashes along the Iran-Iraq border. At that time, Iran offered to sell its Phantom airplanes to Kuwait. When we told them we were not interested, they asked us to relay the offer to the Saudis. They were not interested either. This showed us that Iran was not thinking of entering a war (Marschall 2003, 67).

[7] Mohmmed Reza Shah Pahlavi was the Shah of Iran from 1941 until his overthrow by the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

It is, therefore, unclear why a country ready to sell its air force was consistently identified as a primary source of danger to its neighbors. Additionally, the offense–defense balance demonstrated Iran's inability to pose a military threat to the Persian Gulf compared to Iraq. Iran is separated from Saudi Arabia by a buffer state (Iraq) and an oceanic moat (the Persian Gulf) and lacked the necessary technological capabilities to project its power beyond these barriers. By contrast, Iraq had a large standing army positioned at an easily passable land border, a threat that later materialized during the Gulf War (1991).

In addition, tensions emerged in the U.S.–Saudi partnership. In the Persian Gulf, the loss of the Shah undermined the United States' reliability as a security asset to Arab monarchies (Lippman 2004, 209). United States' efforts to deal with the new regime in Iran further strained the U.S.–Saudi partnership. U.S. refusal to provide asylum for the Shah underscored the Saudi fear that the United States would not protect its regime (Safran 1988, 354). Also, US sponsorship of the Camp David Accords led to serious difficulty in the U.S.–Saudi partnership as the government in Washington, D.C. proposed linking the protection of the Kingdom to Saudi support for the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. In short, alongside the changes in the Persian Gulf, the Kingdom of Saudi Ardabia found it even harder to maintain the balance between cordial relations with the United States and its independent status in the Arab–Israeli conflict—and by logical extension, the Islamic world in general (Safran 1988, 231).

The royal elite was compelled to make policy decisions with far-reaching implications for regional configuration. They wavered between two options ensuring the Kingdom's physical security. The first was balancing Iraq's military ascendance by supporting a weakened Iran and befriending the nationalist Arab camp—namely Syria and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)—in the Arab–Israeli sphere. This choice would mean defying the long-term strategic relationship with the United States and incurring the hostility of Iraq. This would also mean improving the Saudi relationship with Moscow at the expense of the relationship with Washington, D.C. The second option was going along with Iraq and giving up on the balance in the Persian Gulf. This would mean accepting Iraq's regional hegemony and depending more on

the United States for security. This second option would imply the Saudis' support for the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty and, thus foment hostilities with Syria and Iran.

The choice between these two strategic options created tensions within the royal elite, which was divided between those for supporting Iraq and those for befriending Iran. A conservative faction, led by King Khalid and Prince Abdullah, favored befriending Syria and welcoming the Islamic fervor of the new Iranian regime. This faction was supported by a younger generation in the family led by Saud Al-Faisal that advocated for the strengthening of Saudi ties with the nationalist Arab camp and for the improvement of relations with Moscow at the expense of the reliance on the United States (Samore 1983, 416–422; Abir 1993, 127– 128). The opposing faction—led by Crown Prince Fahd and Sultan—advocated a pro-U.S. stance stemming from a deep hostility towards the Soviets.

2. The Regime Identity: A Tradition Reinforced

While the distribution of military capabilities provided the Saudis with policies to ensure the Kingdom's physical security, the regime's identity was fixed. The Saudis perceived the threat emanating from the Islamic Revolution as more prominent. Since the Kingdom's foundation, the Saudi regime identity has been based on the appropriation of Islamic symbols and has included claims such as "our constitution is the Quran" and the application of shari'a. Islam and its Wahhabi interpretation have played a role in consolidating the Saudi regime identity (Nevo 1998).[8] As the sole Islamic model in the region prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Saudi Kingdom propagated this myth to distinguish itself from the so-called secular Arab republics (Al-Yassini 1983, 12–15). When the Islamic Revolution broke out, the Kingdom feared losing its unique Islamic credentials. For the first time, Wahhabism expanded from the domestic sphere, as the state religion and source of legitimacy, to the foreign policy sphere, becoming a source of uniqueness for the regime's identity.

[8] Wahhabism refers to the Saudi variant of Salafiyya. Despite the fact that the term 'Wahhabism' is problematic, I retain it as it is commonly used.

As opposed to other republics in the Arab world, where nationalism was based on ethnic elements combined with the struggle against colonialism, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not formed on the basis of a national identity (Kostiner 1990). Since it contains within its borders two of the three holy cities of Islam—Mecca and Medina—Islam (namely, the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam) served as a powerful impetus for political centralization in the Arabian Peninsula. The Wahhabi movement provided a source of legitimacy to the ruling family and was a powerful tool for uniting various tribes and regions in loyalty to it. Al-Rasheed (2006, 4) expressed the importance of Wahhabism to the Saudi state as follows: "Without Wahhabiyya, there would have been no al-Saud and no Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." This led to the emergence of a fixed regime identity that imposed heavy constraints on the Saudi leadership. The lack of any other national identity made any threats to the Kingdom's identity acute, as the Kingdom could not easily reframe or readapt its identity.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Wahhabism emerged as a fixed narrative guiding the regime's threat perception. While Saudi Arabia wanted to remain the sole Islamic model in the region, the Islamic Revolution downplayed Persian nationalism and promoted themes of Islamic universalism. Khomeini called for Muslim unity and stressed the Palestinian cause as an Islamic one, a position that was similar to the Saudi perspective. Wehrey et al. (2009, 22) characterize Iranian foreign policy at that time as Arab and Sunni. As a result, the Kingdom saw the foundations of its state identity eroded. Its position as the leader of pan-Islamism was being challenged by another regime based on pan-Islamic values. A Saudi official explicated this tension: "Iran's biggest struggle is with Saudi Arabia, not with the United States. Iran wants to challenge the Saudi version of Islam, that is the division of politics and religion" (Marschall 2003, 48). As Prince Turki Al-Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (2013, 38)[9] put it,

> Saudi Arabia is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and the Birthplace of Islam, and as such it is the eminent leader of the wider Muslim world. Iran portrays itself as the

[9] Turki al-Faisal was director of the Saudi general intelligence service between 1977 and 2001.

leader not just of the minority Shiite world, but of all Muslim revolutionaries interested in standing up to the West.

This challenge to Saudi identity was further exacerbated by other domestic incidents. The first event was Juhaymān al-'Utaybī's seizure of the Mecca Mosque on 20 November 1979. Employing a discourse grounded in the Wahhabi tradition, Juhaymān accused the regime of deviating from Islamic values (Al-Rasheed 2006, 105).[10] Moreover, he accused the Ulama of interpreting the Quran in ways that served the non-Islamic policies of the ruling family. Almost simultaneously, the Shiites in the eastern province of the Saudi Kingdom staged protests on 28 November 1979 (Goldberg 1986, 230). Regime security approaches argue that these domestic problems have caused the threat to the Saudi regime and led the elite to reframe their identity. I argue that domestic dimension on its own could not pose an identity risk to the regime. There is no compelling evidence that Iran was involved in Saudi internal affairs; only a small number of Shiite clerics in Saudi Arabia were inspired by Khomeini's speeches (Ibrahim 2006, 117). These domestic dissents magnified the lapses in the regime's identity narrative in facing the threat of the Iranian revolution. Moreover, the inability of the Kingdom to rely on other sources of identity increased the leaders' perceptions of this ideational threat.

While looking to distinguish the Saudi version of Islam from the Iranian one, the Saudi ruling elite reinforced the traditional ideas embedded in the Saudi regime's historical origins—namely, Wahhabism. The emergence of Wahhabism as a foreign policy resource reflected the regime's ceaseless quest to make Saudi Arabia unique in the region. These efforts were manifest in many ways. First, in 1984, King Fahd adopted a new, more Islamic, national anthem. Second, in 1986, he changed his title from "His Majesty" to "Guardian of Two Holy Places" (Marschall 2003, 48). In addition, the power of the 'ulama was strengthened and the conservative Wahhabi Sunni image of the Kingdom was promoted via a sectarian rhetorical discourse against the

[10] The seizure of Mecca was an event independent from the Islamic revolution. For more details on Al-'Utaybī's movement, cf. Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007).

perceived enemy, Iran. By granting the 'ulama more control over social and religious life, the regime reinforced a stricter Wahhabi code of conduct (Steinberg 2005).

Furthermore, the Kingdom reinforced a representation of the "Saudi-Wahhabi self" contrasted with the "Iranian-Shi'a other." Traditional Wahhabism demonized Shiites as "the incarnation of infidelity, and…polytheists," making it the duty of believers "to manifest enmity to the polytheists [who] were perceived as unbelievers (*kufār*), and were therefore liable to the severest sanctions, including that of holy war (jihad)" (Goldberg 1986, 232). This Saudi portrayal of Shi'ism was often associated with the word *al-rāfiḍa* (defectors),[11] which placed the Iranian regime outside of the Muslim community. This discourse of exclusion, based on religious otherness framed within religious dogma, was intended to highlight Saudi Arabia's religious uniqueness, which was necessary to forge a distinct state-identity narrative.

The emergence of the Saudi identity as the primary driver of threat perception resulted from a fixed regime identity that provided constraints, while the distribution of military capabilities offered Saudi leaders several policy options to ensure physical security. In an effort to preserve and reinforce their identity, Saudi leaders supported Saddam Hussein against the militarily weakened revolutionary regime. This does not mean that Saudi Arabia ultimately gave up material security concerns; Saudi Arabia remained worried about Saddam Hussein's regional aspirations. Nevertheless, the message of the Islamic Revolution constituted a threat to the Saudi regime identity, which was fixed and lacked maneuver for adaptation.

SYRIA

LIMITED STRATEGIC OPTIONS AND FLUID IDENTITY

[11] This term is now used by Saudi Wahhabi clerics to refer to Shi'a Muslims as rejecting the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah (path).

If Wahhabism and its fixity as a regime identity shaped Saudi threat perception, Syria illustrates the case of a regime identity that adjusted and adapted to the dictates of material power distribution. The Syrian case illustrates the third situation in the theoretical framework, according to which the regime disposes of multiple identity narratives whereas the distribution of military capabilities offered only limited options to ensure Syria's physical security. This section discusses why and how the Arab-nationalist Syrian regime, a subscriber to a secular Ba'athist ideology, supported non-Arab Iran, an Islamic regime bent on exporting its revolutionary theological doctrine against Iraq, an Arab and Ba'athist regime. The Syrian decision to align with Iran was arguably shaped by Syria's limited strategic options, which led to the violation of Syrian regime identity, namely pan-Arabism. I, first, examine Syrian geopolitical imperatives throughout the 1970s and the challenges driving its alliance with Iran on the eve of the Iran–Iraq War. I, then, outline how the regime's identity changed from pan-Arabism to a more state-centric model to accommodate and adapt to the new balance of military power.

1. The Strategic Balance of Power: Limited Options

While the events of 1979 presented multiple policy choices for the Saudi leaders, their Syrian counterparts were constrained and their options were limited. Due to its geostrategic location and limited resources, Syria constantly faced an unfavorable regional balance of power. Amid its struggle against Israel, Syria's need for regional allies became severe following the 1967 Arab defeat. Throughout the 1970s, al-Assad built a constructive relationship with fellow Arab countries: he allied with Egypt, terminated the Syrian isolation imposed by the oil monarchies, and pursued a détente with Iraq (Salloukh 2000, 400–401). The success of this strategy was displayed in the emergence of the Damascus-Riyadh-Cairo axis during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War (Sunayama 2007, 37–41). In 1979, however, Syria was again isolated; al-Assad's strategy to maintain Syria as the center of the Arab world collapsed due to events beyond Syria's control. These events included the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty, the degradation of Syrian–Iraqi relations, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The Egyptian–Syrian alliance quickly collapsed in the post-war period. As Egypt favored the negotiations with Israel for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, the Syrian regime felt betrayed.al-Assad denounced al-Sadat's visit in November 1977 to Jerusalem and pursued three major goals from 1977 to 1979: (1) increase Syria's military build-up with more reliance on the Soviet Union; (2) mobilize an Arab opposition front to isolate Egypt; and (3) find other Arab partners to counterbalance Israel's military capabilities. However, these efforts were unsuccessful. In 1979, the signing of the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty created a severe dilemma for Syria. In one move, the treaty removed the Arab world's strongest actor from the Arab–Israeli stage and left the Syrian regime severely exposed.

The breakdown of the Egyptian–Syrian alliance convinced the Syrian elite that self-reliance in defense was a fundamental requirement of the new balance-of-power equation. The regime initiated a military build-up, known as the strategic parity policy. This effort was, however, unsuccessful in achieving such parity with Israel (Kandil 2008, 428). Alongside this internal balancing strategy, Syria worked to marginalize Egypt and mobilize an Eastern front to counterbalance Israel's military superiority. Less than three weeks after al-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Syria, South Yemen, Algeria, and Libya, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) formed the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front (*Jabhat al-Ṣumūd wa al-Taṣadī*). This front had the potential to act as the most important inter-Arab force in the Arab–Israeli sphere. However, this Arab quasi-consensus was short-lived.

Alternatively, the Syrian regime set its sights on Baghdad as the primary regional partner that could fill the vacuum caused by Egypt's formal exit from the Arab camp. Given its military capabilities, Iraq was the only Arab state capable of counterbalancing Israel's power. The Syrian quest for an alternative Arab ally converged with an Iraqi regional bid to fill the gap and to play a leading role in the Arab system. In 1979, Syria's critical vulnerability and Iraq's regional ambitions brought about what Kienle (1990, 135) termed a "marriage contre nature." A rapprochement between the two Ba'athist regimes had taken place from 1978 until mid-1979. In his February 1991 speech to the secretaries and members of the Ba'ath Party's branch

commands, Abdul Halim Khaddam explained Syrian foreign policy towards Iraq in this period as follows: “Syria’s starting-point was to hold onto Iraq in any way, because after Egypt’s exit [from the Arab camp] we felt that the great [regional] balance was upset as a result of its exit, and that we had to act in a swift manner, and with all our energies, to restore the balance to the region” (Salloukh 2000, 432). However, with the ascendance of Saddam Hussein to the presidency in 1979, the Syrian strategy of relying on Iraq to balance against Israel proved unsuccessful, and Baghdad turned from being an asset into the most dangerous of Syria’s Arab neighbours in less than a year.

When the partnership between Iraq and Syria formally failed, Saudi Arabia consolidated a new entente with Iraq, leaving Syria isolated. On 17 September 1979, Saudi Minister of the Interior Prince Nayef concluded an agreement with Iraq on security cooperation (Ramazani 1986, 73). Damascus became even more powerless when a parallel Jordanian–Iraqi rapprochement developed (Taylor 1982). This Riyadh–Baghdad–Amman axis alienated Damascus. This isolation affected Syria’s position on the Arab–Israeli front, and the emerging parity between Iran and Iraq was another source of fear for al-Assad's regime. The Iraqi aspiration to regional hegemony was manifested in its military build-up. Following the increase in oil prices during the 1970s, Iraq's army doubled in size, reaching 242,000 men in 1979. Its defense expenditures increased to US$2.67 billion (The Military Balance 1980:42). Ultimately, Syria had to deal with Israel’s military supremacy and with Iraq’s ascent, which was not only destabilizing on the ideological level, but also posing a military threat (Marschall 1992). Both states shared long borders with Syria and had considerable projection capabilities.

Syria’s exposure to Israel’s military supremacy and Iraq’s hegemonic aspirations, as well as its isolation in inter-Arab politics, coincided with the Islamic revolution in Iran. As Damascus had long considered the Shah’s regime to be pro-Israeli, the overthrow of the monarchy and the advent of a regime that was not aligned with Israel constituted an opportunity for Syria to balance Israel and, more importantly, to end its isolation within the Arab world. As Hafez al-Assad openly stated,

> This revolution introduced substantial changes in the strategic balance… [Iran] supports the Arabs, without hesitation…for the sake of liberating our lands…How can we…lose a country like Iran of the Islamic revolution…with all its human, military, and economic potential. (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997, 93)

The outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in September 1980 constituted an acute challenge to the Syrian regime. Already facing an unbalanced Israel, Syria had to deal with the regional consequences of a potential Iraqi victory in the east. Khaddam portrayed Syria's fear in this context as follows: "the Iran-Iraq War was two wars: one against Iran and the second against Syria" (Baraka 2011). Syria sided with Iran to balance against security threats from Israel and protect its regional position from an unbearable Iraqi victory. As Syria was having limited options to ensure its physical security, the regime identity narrative was adjusted to accommodate the regime's physical security needs.

2. The Syrian Regime Identity: A Strategic Adaptation

In contrast to Nasser's claim that Arabs should only unite with Arabs, al-Assad aligned with a non-Arab state, challenging Arab states across the Persian Gulf. In doing so, al-Assad violated the very basic norm of his regime's identity, which led to a change in its content. However, this violation of pan-Arabism reflects a more complex process. While the material power distribution offered limited policy options ensuring Syria's physical security, the regime identity was multilayered and included multiple narratives. The constraints imposed by the distribution of military capabilities dominated Syria's threat perception and determined the choice of identity narrative. The following discussion highlights the fluidity in the Syrian regime's identity, and the changes in its narrative that was driven by its alliance with Iran and by the imbalance in the Arab–Israeli sphere. I, first, present the disparate narratives that besieged the regime's identity: Syrian nationalism and pan-Arabism. I, then, examine the changes in the content of this identity and its move toward a more defined Syrian nationalism under a pan-Arab label. I argue that the Syrian regime's identity underwent two main changes. First, it became more distinct from the "Arab Nation." In other words, Syrian nationalism predominated Arab nationalism. Second, the pan-Arab component of Syrian identity was

narrowed down, and its meaning altered from the unity among Arab states to the struggle against Israel.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Syrian regime's identity wavered between two poles: Arabism and Syrian nationalism. Arabism represented a total commitment to the idea of Arab unity to the extent of denying any separate identity to the Syrian state. At the other pole, Syrian nationalism implied a total commitment to a distinct Syrian identity based on the establishment of a greater Syrian state within the natural geographic borders of Bilād al-Shām. At the early stages of state formation, the Syrian leaders sought a middle ground. They adopted the Arab identity as an overarching narrative while aknowledging the existence of a Syrian state. By bridging these two dimensions, the Syrian regime created a vague and fluid identity encompassing competing multilayered narratives (Phillips 2012).

These narratives did not always carry equal weight. From independence until the late 1970s, pan-Arabism remained the central theme in the Syrian identity. The official name of the new republic, "The Arab Syrian Republic," expressed the declared order of the various sources of the regime's identity. Arab solidarity and unity occupied a privileged place in the regime's foreign policy discourse, and Arab nationalist considerations often explained the regime's policy choices. This interpretation of Arabism, though imposed by the elites, reached the people who developed a real sense of integration into the larger Arab Nation and firmly believed in its realization. Public speeches and media statements were filled with references to the "Arab people" and the "Arab Umma," whereas references to the Syrian entity were ambiguous and minimal (Kienle 1995, 58–61). Arab nationalism was portrayed by the regime as the struggle to unite the Arab lands, stretching from Morocco to Iraq, into one Arab state where the nation and the state would coincide (Valbjørn 2009).

Nevertheless, the calls for a Syrian nationalism were constantly present, even though the consolidation of this territorial entity into a nation state was slow and mitigated until 1980. The failure of several Arab unity schemes and the different military clashes with neighboring

states—Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan—slowly led the Syrians to construct their own community. A sense of otherness within the Arab world slowly developed, and a consciousness emerged among Syrians that they were not just Arabs or Muslims, but that they belonged to a state – i.e., Syria.

The two dominant regime-identity narratives were in competition. On the one hand, Arabism dictated that Syria support Iraq against Iran. However, such a policy choice would mean endangering Syria's material interests, as the regime lacked the capability to fight on two fronts, Israel and Iran, simultaneously. On the other hand, Syrian nationalism dictated support for Iran as the major ally in Syria's struggle against Israel. The material power distribution determined which of these narratives won out. As of 1979, al-Assad redefined the regime's identity. As Sadowski (2002, 151) puts it, "Assad has tended to act as neither a pan-Arabist nor a pan-Syrianist but a Syrian." Accordingly, the content of Syria's identity changed spectacularly, in a process that has often been described as the consolidation of the Syrian state and the redefinition of Arab nationalism in Syrian terms. Hinnebusch (2001, 140) succinctly summarizes such change: "the meaning of Arabism [altered] from a cause for which Syria would sacrifice to a means to reach Syrian ends."

This change was illustrated by the emergence of Syria as a relatively autonomous entity whose material interests were not necessarily compatible with those advocated by pan-Arabism. Syria replaced the "Arab Homeland" (*al-waṭan al-'arabī*) as the essential point of reference in the legitimation of government decisions. Even though al-Assad and other representatives of the regime avoided using explicit notions to herald this change, they advanced implicit references to the Syrians as a distinct entity. After 1979, al-Assad used "the Syrian people" instead of "the Arab people of Syria" in his speeches. Also, "the Syrian citizen" replaced "the Arab citizen in Syria." Additionally, the policies were justified as being in "Syria's *qawmī* and *waṭanī* interest" or at least serving "Syria" (Kienle 1995).

Pan-Arabism, the overarching regime identity, was relegated to the sidelines. Instead of announcing its death, the regime frayed the appeal and prevalence of pan-Arabism by changing its meaning. Arabism was no longer defined according to intrinsic characteristics—such as Arab ethnicity and the Arab language. Rather, it was the struggle against Israel that defined who the Arab was and who his allies were. In other words, Arabism, often used in the pledge for Arab unity, became limited to Syria's conflict with Israel. Thus, considering its change of strategy towards Israel and its commitment to the Palestinian cause, Iran was an ally compatible with Syria's new, nuanced Arab identity. The media foregrounded Khomeini's support for the opposition to the Israeli–Egyptian peace settlement. *Al-Thawra's* headline on 27 October 1979 stated, "Iran: we are in the same Trench as the Arabs" (Kedar 2006, 179–180).

Syrian foreign minister Fārūq al-Shar' stated this change in the Syrian conception of Arabism:

> It was not long after the signing of the Camp David accords in 1979 that the Islamic Republic of Iran was suddenly attacked for no reason. The attack came immediately after the success of its revolution after it closed the Israeli embassy in Tehran and gave it to Palestine, and after it adopted Arabic as an official language in the country. It was very strange indeed for Muslim Iran to be attacked by an Arab capital that sponsored the Arab National Charter and the Arab summit (quoted in B. Rubin 2000, 22).

In short, pan-Arabism was redefined to suit Syria's military needs vis-à-vis Israel and became a concept void of its crucial component: Arabness. In contrast to the fixity of Wahhabism in the Saudi case, Syria's regime identity was fluid and multilayered. The ideational challenge emerging from the Islamic revolution to the regime could be overcome through reframing and changing the overriding narrative.

CONCLUSION

Neorealists and constructivists fundamentally agree that ideational and material forces matter in intertnational relations, but they remain biased towards one or the other. While previous eclectic works borrowing from more than one paradigm acknowledge the possibility of combining both elements, they remain confined to a structural approach to the study of

international relations, and agents' behaviors have been overlooked. This article further contributes to analytical eclecticism by drawing attention to the conditions under which ideational and material forces matter in actors' threat perceptions. By probing the plausibility of this argument through the cases of Syria and Saudi Arabia, the article examines the two regimes' divergent threat perceptions through the prism of the interplay between each regime's respective identity and its particular position in the regional structure.

Both Saudi Arabia and Syria faced various challenges. Iraq's military ambitions emerged when Iran's military capabilities were declining, which constituted a material threat. Meanwhile, the Islamic Revolution posed an ideational challenge through its appeal to overthrow regimes oppressing Islamist movements. Yet, both Syria and Saudi Arabia diverged on what constitutes the most prominent threat. In accordance with a two-layered framework of analysis, Saudi and Syrian cases demonstrate that perceptions of threat depend on the characteristics of the regime identity and the available policy options to ensure its physical security. On the one hand, regimes consider ideational threats to be more prominent if the regime identity is fixed and the distribution of military capabilities presents leaders with multiple policy options. The perception of the distribution of military capabilities becomes subordinate to the needs of the identity. On the other hand, regimes consider material threats as more prominent if the regime identity is fluid and leaders have the ability to reframe their narratives whereas material constraints limit their policies in achieving physical security.

The article highlights the characteristics of identity, which should be carefully taken into account. Identity is by nature changeable; it is shaped and reshaped overtime through interactions with significant others. Nevertheless, the interaction with the significant other is not necessarily the only means by which identity narratives are changing. Instead, Syria's case shows that the material constraints were a main drive behind identity change. The cases highlight another characteristic of identity, fluidity. This characteristic involves the extent to which identities are fixed and whether political entrepreneurs can change and create identities

at will. Identity serves as a major source of foreign policy, yet its function is, by nature, fluid. A state has multiple identities, each of which may persist, evolve, or cease to exist over time. Given such versatile aspects of identity, this study cautions against overly deterministic approaches treating state identity as a permanent property of the state or suggesting that identity is constantly the sole determinant of threat perception (Saideman 2002, 186–188). Although a fluid identity can increase leaders' freedom of maneuver, this does not mean, however, that identity fluidity gives leaders a free hand in manipulating identity narratives. Identities can also structure and constrain leaders' behaviors. The Saudi case shows that identity can be a strong constraint on state behavior.

Given the adaptable and changeable nature of identity, there is little reason to limit the application of identity solely to long-term phenomena. This article does not claim that Saudi foreign policy will be always driven by ideational factors, nor does it claim that Syrian foreign policy will be eternally driven by material ones. Instead, states can switch paths. Saudi Arabia can develop other identities that provide leaders with relative freedom of maneuver and lessen the burden on the security of its identity. Similarly, some of Syria's multiple identities can cease to exist, putting more pressure on its identity security.

Finally, the implications of this article extend beyond the scope of Syrian and Saudi threat perceptions to other cases in the region. On the one hand, the framework can travel across space by applying it to other countries. Potential cases include Jordan, a small state where physical security is important, but ideational factors are crucial in holding together various domestic groups. Another interesting case is Egypt, where threat perception towards Iran has constituted a cornerstone in Egyptian foreign policy for decades. Egypt is a rather homogenous country with no Shiite minority. Nevertheless, Iran, a geopolitically distant country, has been constantly identified as a threat. On the other hand, the framework can travel across time to account for other dynamics unfolding in the Middle East. It can enlighten Syrian and Saudi divergence towards Hezbollah and Hamas during the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2009 Gaza

War, respectively. Moreover, the framework may shed additional light on recent developments in the region, including Saudi fears from the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In sum, identity and material interests equally matter in regimes' threat perceptions. In some cases, the fluidity of identity is likely to mitigate ideational threats, and the multiplicity or paucity of strategic options can profoundly affect the perception of military threats. This article, thus, showed that threat perception is not only a mere event preceding alliance decisions, but a complex phenomenon at the intersection of material capabilities and identity politics, at both domestic and international levels.

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