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Regionalism and Alliances in the Middle East, 2011-2021: From a “Flash in the Pan” of Regional Cooperation to Liquid Alliances

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the shifting patterns of regionalism and alliance formation in the Middle East in the decade following the 2011 Arab uprisings. It seeks to explain why regional organizations, most notably the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, failed to advance any durable regional cooperation, in spite of an initial period of bold activism. Second, the article seeks to shed light on why government-driven, informal and instable regional alignments that also include non-Arab parties and non-state actors came to prevail instead. Our approach draws on Stephan Walt’s concept of the balance of threats; we posit however that this concept needs to integrate a liberal-constructivist perspective to assess both the nature of threats and the significance of domestic factors. While we consider the Arab uprisings a potential turning point, our explanation of the patterns of cooperation and conflict in the Middle East after the uprisings points to regime (in)security and shifting threat perceptions as key factors. They explain the side-lining of established regional organizations and the priority given to alternative and volatile forms of regional cooperation, that is, the prevalence of “liquid alliances.”

Introduction

The popular saying “*itafaq al-‘arab ‘ala an la itafaqu*” (‘the Arabs agreed not to agree’) perhaps best describes the long history of the League of Arab States, or Arab League, since its inception in 1945. While the Arab League is the oldest functioning regional organisation worldwide, regionalism – understood here as the policies, practices, and ideas of institutionalised cooperation between states and non-state actors within a geographically defined area – has remained limited in this part of the world. Existing cooperation platforms have rarely played a role in matters of regional security, the level of regional trade has remained low, and political integration is lacking (e.g., Aarts 1999; Fawcett 2019b; Legrenzi and Harders 2008; Salloukh and Brynen 2004). Even

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), once portrayed as a successful sub-regional organisation, experienced a deep crisis between 2017 and 2021.

The Arab uprisings that swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from early 2011 onwards triggered a period of acute political crisis and turmoil. In the immediate aftermath of the revolts, Arab states sought to weather the storm by cooperating through established regional institutions. Against the backdrop of a wide-spread belief in the possible strengthening of cooperative security mechanisms (Fawcett 2019b), the Arab League and the GCC adopted a proactive role. Particularly the Arab League, ‘that fossilized regional organization’ (Korany 2013, 93), took several bold decisions. Its suspension of Syria’s membership in November 2011 and the support for international interventions in Libya, for example, were unprecedented. These steps marked a clear departure from the Arab League’s mandate – and tradition – of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states.

From 2013 onwards, however, the patterns of regional cooperation changed considerably. The Arab League projected disunity and the boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain in June 2017 paralysed the GCC. Instead, alternative patterns of regional cooperation against shared rivals and threats emerged. The most telling examples are the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) and the so-called Arab Quartet comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt.

This period also witnessed the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between major regional powers, such as between Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as between Qatar and Turkey. This bilateral trend would continue with the normalisation of relations between Israel and several Arab countries in 2020. MENA governments, Arab and non-Arab alike, continued to seek allies in turbulent times, but they preferred loose case-by-case alignments instead of well-established organisations.

This article addresses the puzzling development of regional cooperation in the MENA region over a time span of a decade, starting with the Arab uprisings in early 2011 and ending with the suspension of the boycott of Qatar in January 2021. To address and react to a situation of pronounced political instability and crisis, MENA governments had three options: first, cooperating through established regional institutions; second, establishing new alliances; or third, engaging in informal and temporary forms of security cooperation. The first option, that is, regional cooperation through established organisations – the Arab League and the GCC – was attempted but was all but durable; it was a flash in the pan. The second option never went beyond speculative discussions, as demonstrated by the unsuccessful plans to create a ‘Middle East Security Alliance’ (MESA), to be formed by the US, the GCC countries, and other Arab states (Farouk 2019). However, the third option, that is, loose and ever-shifting security alignments, became the prevalent pattern of cooperation and conflict in the post-2011 Middle East.

We conceptualise the ad hoc, non-institutionalised, and rapidly shifting cooperation patterns that came to prevail in the Middle East after 2013 as ‘liquid alliances’, as explained further below. Our explanation of why this specific form of regional cooperation became predominant highlights the importance of heightened regime insecurity and shifting threat perceptions in a situation of extreme uncertainty at the local, regional, and global level. With a multitude of (real or perceived) threats emanating from different but interlinked levels of analysis, the increased sense of insecurity in these turbulent times defined regime preferences regarding regional cooperation and alliance formation. Against the backdrop of a pronounced fluidity of the regional and international environment, the ever-growing concern with political survival of the region’s main actors thus explain why the patterns of cooperation after 2011 transitioned from initial attempts to cooperate through established regional institutions to engagement in various liquid alliances. The salience of liquid alliances – a distinct form of alliance formation in the Middle East in the post-2011 period – thus results from both fluctuating threat perceptions of major actors in the system and shifting structural conditions.

To substantiate our argument, we analyse the patterns of regional alliance formation in the Middle East over the decade from 2011 to 2021. We first focus on the initiatives and (in)actions of the two main regional organisations in the Middle East, the Arab League and the GCC, and subsequently discuss the emergence and multiplication of liquid alliances. We assess the changing preferences and threat perceptions of regional actors that are members of the two regional organisations as well as of regional powers that are not part of these institutions. As official statements and press releases of these organisations and national ministries provide limited information on internal decision-making processes and preference formation, the article relies on 14 face-to-face interviews with senior Arab League and GCC officials, diplomats of various Arab states, and international diplomats, conducted in Cairo and Riyadh between December 2017 and February 2018. On condition of anonymity, our interview partners shared their insights on the state of regional integration, the challenges faced by each organisation against the backdrop of a rapidly changing security environment, the threat perceptions of the main regional actors, and their preferences regarding regional cooperation and alliance formation. We conducted an additional six anonymised interviews with government officials from the region and international diplomats, which took place face-to-face or online between December 2017 and February 2021.

Before analysing the reasons for the ‘flash in the pan’ of institutionalised regional cooperation and the subsequent emergence of liquid

alliances, we revisit the role of threats and insecurity in alliance formation in the Middle East from a theoretical perspective. In this endeavour, we critically engage with Stephen Walt's 'realist' balance of threat theory and also elaborate on the concept of 'liquid alliances' in this context.

Insecurity and Middle East Regional Cooperation in Theoretical Perspective

Attempts to assess the nature and prospects of the policies and practices of regionalism in the Middle East have produced an extensive body of literature.¹ Scholars have often considered the failure to establish solid regional arrangements, whether in the realms of security, politics, or economics, as an anomaly, allegedly reflecting the broader trend of the Middle East being immune to developments in other parts of the world (e.g., Aarts 1999, 911). While it is certainly misleading to apply 'Western' standards to the analysis of regionalism in the MENA (Acharya 2011; Fawcett 2020), scholars tend to differ on the main reasons for the relatively low level of institutionalised regional cooperation. Yet, reflecting Joseph Nye's observation that the patterns of conflict in the Middle East are consistent with the realist model (Nye 1997, 163–73), realism, in its classical or structuralist variants, became a prominent perspective on the region. Many studies have thus focused on power asymmetries, persisting security dilemmas, competing economies, recurrent conflicts, the strong influence of international actors, or a combination of the above. Yet, in reality, analyses of regionalism and alliance formation in the Middle East have often combined different theoretical approaches with realist baselines (e.g. Gause 2003; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2019; Lynch 1998), with the few self-declared realist scholars – perhaps unintentionally – often espousing not-so-realist assumptions. In other words, Realist-centric approaches themselves never seem to be fully able to explain alliance formation in the Middle East and often need to draw in perspectives usually associated with their critics.

To illustrate, in his seminal analysis of alliance formation in the Middle East, Stephen Walt (1987) reformulated the neorealist balance of power approach by arguing that the patterns of cooperation and conflict follow the logic of the balance of *threats*. In keeping with this tradition, Gregory Gause (2003) observed that states in the Middle East tend to give higher priority to *threats to the regime* over 'traditional' foreign policy concerns. According to this argument, regimes – defined as authoritarian rule that is concentrated in the hands of a leader or elites and permeates state institutions – balance against those states that are most hostile towards them, irrespective of the distribution of material power and geographic proximity. Curtis Ryan (2009) similarly stressed that the *concern with regime security* provides a better account of Arab foreign policies and the choice of alliances than does

a traditional realist framework. For Ryan (2015, 43), Arab regimes ‘remain frequently trapped in internal and external security dilemmas of their own making, obsessed with ensuring the security of their ruling regimes against both internal and external challenges’. By distinguishing between *national security* and *regime security*, these approaches depart from Walt’s theory (also Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2019; Korany 2013). Going one step further, Rubin (2014) accounts for the reactions of Arab regimes to Iran’s revolution, Sudan’s Islamist coup, and the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt by modifying two key concepts of realism. Arguing that ideational threats may present a greater security threat than shifts in the military balance of power, Rubin proposes the notions of *ideational security dilemma* and *ideational balancing* to explain regional politics in the Middle East.

Importantly, this body of scholarship at least tacitly implies that the definition of threats and their prioritisation are not fixed or given, but rather (inter) subjective and partly arbitrary, as constructivist approaches and critical security studies have postulated (e.g., Bilgin 2010; Krause and Williams 1997; Wendt 1992).² By treating threats as its key analytical concept, the balance of threats theory – including in its original version – leaves the door open for problematising perceptions and identities and the ways in which threats are defined (e.g., Barnett 1996; Jervis 1976). Echoing Rubin (2014), Darwich (2019) has shown that in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Syria, ideational factors are at least as important as material factors in a regime’s definition of threats. Her analysis thus focuses on the conditions under which the one or the other prevail.³

Taking ideational factors seriously also allows for the possibility that threat perceptions may change without any alteration in material factors. Equally, it implies that incumbent regimes or aspiring leaders may manipulate notions of threats for their own political aims. The manipulation and securitisation of collective identities in the Middle East – most notably the geopolitically charged construction of sectarian difference between Sunni and Shia in the context of the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran – has been analysed extensively in the literature (e.g., Darwich and Fakhoury 2016; Hashemi and Postel 2017; Mabon 2013; Malmvig 2014; Matthiessen 2013; Rubin 2014; Valbjørn 2019).

From this perspective, insecurity and concern for regime survival can be considered to have been the main drivers of institutionalised collective action in the early days of the Arab uprisings. When analysing the patterns of regional cooperation in the Middle East, a second aspect to consider is the nature of domestic politics and their interlinkage with developments at the regional and international level. Domestic factors usually impact greatly on the assessment of the nature and salience of threats to regime survival. The Middle East is a region ‘with weak states and regional institutions, where territory and borders are contested’ (Fawcett 2019a, 6), with Arab states not exemplifying strength but rather fierceness (Ayubi 1996). The

contested domestic legitimacy of Arab regimes and an acute perception of vulnerability have traditionally conditioned security dilemmas in the Middle East (Del Sarto 2017; Fawcett 2017; Hudson 1979). These were often accentuated by events with a high regional impact, such as the Free Officers coup in Egypt in 1952, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003.

Bold and conflictual foreign policy behaviour, in addition to the lip service paid to regional cooperation under the mantra of pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism, have traditionally been useful tools of Arab states in their attempts to enhance sovereignty and strengthen their legitimacy at home (Fawcett 2020). Barnett and Solingen (2007, 181) stressed for instance that 'the politics of Arab nationalism and a shared identity led Arab states to embrace the rhetoric of Arab unity in order to legitimize their regimes, and to fear Arab unity in practice'. Competing with other transnational identities, pan-Arabism may have lost its relevance today. However, while a distinct Arab dimension in regional politics persists, states and non-state actors in the Middle East continue to refer to Arab solidarity to enhance their legitimacy and justify their policies (Valbjørn and Bank 2012).

Thus, a lack of domestic legitimacy and regime insecurity have traditionally explained the relatively low performance of regionalism. From the outset, it was clear that 'regional organizations, if taken seriously as mechanisms for collective decision-making, would provide a threat to these same regimes as radical as that of the various forms of menace to which they were ostensibly a response' (Tripp 1995, 306). Regional organisations thus also remained institutionally weak, preventing them from playing any significant role.

Domestic factors condition the low level of regional cooperation in the MENA for an additional reason. Solingen (2007, 2008, 2015) highlights the causal relationship between the nature of domestic coalitions vying for power and the nature of the regional order. The prevalence of inward-looking domestic coalitions in the Middle East, characterised by a reliance on economic self-sufficiency, state and military entrepreneurship, illiberalism, and nationalism, causes the predominance of conflictual grand strategies and erratic foreign policy behaviour in a region. Yet, conflictual foreign policies and the lack of regional cooperation only reinforce the domestic logic of inward-looking coalitions (Solingen 2015, 52).⁴ Inward-looking MENA regimes may still seek economic and security cooperation with outside actors, such as the United States, Europe, China, or Russia. The Emirates are a good case in point here. But bilateralism will define the cooperation with these external actors (Cammatt et al. 2015, ch. 13), with the resulting hub-and-spoke system further undermining regional cooperation.

Thus, the construction of threats to regime survival and their significance for the balance of threats, together with the domestic features of the regional system, must be factored in when trying to assess the patterns of conflict and cooperation in the MENA region. A constructivist perspective

that accounts both for domestic features and the construction of threats must therefore be integrated into Walt's theory of the balance of threats – and explicitly so.

This perspective seems even more relevant in the decade after the Arab uprisings as threats to regime survival (or perceptions thereof) have intensified. The deposal of several long-term Arab dictators through popular revolts, the electoral victory of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt, the descent of Syria, Libya, and Yemen into civil war and the rapid multiplication of armed non-state actors in the region augmented the sense of insecurity of the surviving autocratic regimes. Importantly, these threats also originated at distinct but increasingly interlinked levels of analysis, with domestic politics playing a significant role. For example, the Arab uprisings and related domestic developments across the region prompted the surviving Arab regimes to increase their meddling in the politics of neighbouring Arab states and to seek support from external actors, thereby further contributing to the region's volatility and fragmentation. The Arab uprisings thus revealed and at the same time massively contributed to wide-spread state weakness in the region and intensified the perception of regime insecurity, with power vacuums inviting 'the intervention of powers near and far' (Gause 2022, 10).

The securitisation of sectarian identities mentioned earlier that marked both the domestic politics of several MENA states and wider regional dynamics is a further case in point. As the region became even more insecure, fragmented, and unstable, the sense of regime insecurity augmented notably. MENA regimes responded by 'shifting alliances and alignments to better ensure regime security' (Ryan 2015, 43). Erratic foreign policy and bold alliance choices promised a quicker fix to regime security concerns than addressing domestic challenges and engaging in serious domestic political reforms (*ibid.*).⁵

Domestic and regional politics are, of course, also embedded in, and shaped by, the international permeation⁶ of the Middle East regional system. With the raging civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, the diminished US appetite for direct interventions in the region added to the regime's perception of vulnerability. Particularly those states that had traditionally relied on US security guarantees, such as Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf monarchies, were apprehensive of Washington's (alleged) retreat from the Middle East. The diminished ability to leverage their position as oil supplier, partly because of global decarbonisation trends and partly because the US has become a net exporter of crude oil and liquified natural gas, seemed to undermine the power base of the oil-rich Gulf monarchies even further. The emerging multipolarity of the international system and the growing involvement of extra-regional powers in Middle East affairs, such as Russia and China, further augmented the regime's sense of insecurity, translating into attempts to find alternative security guarantees and diversify foreign relations. The changing geopolitical environment thus also offered states and non-state actors in the MENA region a greater choice of potential allies.

This perspective resonates with Christopher Phillips' analysis of the structural conditions shaping the outbreak and course of the Syrian conflict. The end of the US-dominated multipolarity of the international system intersected with the shift towards multipolarity at the regional level, with this intersection explaining the outcome (Phillips 2022). Challenging a traditional neorealist reading, this study demonstrates that the regional system is (at least) as important as global structural conditions in explaining the progression of the civil war in Syria. Thus, while the external permeation of the region and the system's type of polarity affect local policies and choices, the literature's all-too frequent pre-occupation with the role of external actors – usually the US – to explain alliance formation and regional order in the Middle East (e.g., Hazbun 2019; Hudson 1992) is reductive: it fails to capture the significance of (local) agency in the construction of threats, which must primarily be analysed at the (interlinked) domestic and regional levels of analysis.

The Concept of Liquid Alliances

The accelerated pace and multiplicity of events in the Middle East post-Arab uprisings, reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman's notion of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000),⁷ prompted the emergence of a far more volatile and ad hoc type of balancing. 'Liquid alliances' (Soler i Lecha 2017) thus became the dominant pattern of cooperation and conflict in the Middle East.

Liquid alliances present several distinct features. They usually consist of rather informal multinational coalitions and groupings, often relying on a bilateral axis. Liquid alliances frequently involve both states and armed non-state actors, such as the warlord Khalifa Haftar in Libya, different militias in the Syrian civil war, or the Lebanese Hezbollah. As with other traditional alliances, liquid alliances are usually driven by common interests and fear. The main difference is, however, that actors entering liquid alliances are not only fearful of their rivals but often suspicious of their allies, too. The existence of rapidly changing and sometimes contradictory threat perceptions, together with the absence of binding commitments and solid institutions to counter these, explain why liquid alliances can dissolve as quickly as they emerged. Patterns of alliance formation become extremely volatile as a result. Crucially, in this type of alignments, allies in one conflict frequently – and simultaneously – confront each other in another dispute, often by proxy, rendering the question of which actors are friends in the Middle East, and which are foes, rather difficult to answer.

Liquid alliances thus defy Glenn Snyder's definition of alliances as 'formal associations of states for the use (or nonuse) of military force, in specific circumstances, against states outside their own membership' (Snyder 1997, 4). But neither do liquid alliances qualify as 'tacit alignments based solely on common interests' (ibid.), which Snyder differentiated from formal alliances. Neither definition

captures the liquid patterns of political and military cooperation among the key players in the Middle East in the time span under consideration.

The concept of liquid alliances relies on the premise that the regional system in the Middle East does not, or does not primarily, consist of black-box states, as neorealists would have it. Rather, it conceives of the regional system as a 'multipolar structure with competing state, transnational, and societal actors' (Hazbun 2010, 244). Structural features shape the nature of threats (and the perception of these) and thus the alliance preferences of the actors in the system. Yet, and as mentioned earlier, the international permeation of the regional system and changes in the wider geopolitical environment are important but not main factors explaining balancing, regionalism, and alliance formation in the Middle East after 2011.

Instead, and without ignoring the relevance of material factors, the concept of liquid alliances underscores the importance of ideational factors as major drivers of alliance formation in the Middle East post-2011, together with the actors promoting specific threat perceptions. Equally, the focus on heightened regime insecurity and shifting threat perceptions to explain the patterns of regional cooperation implies that discursive practices are not merely a reflection of 'objective' geopolitical realities. This is because discourse and representation of geopolitical realities also shape the definition of interests and identities while actively producing and reproducing these realities, a central claim of constructivist IR scholarship, critical security studies, and critical geopolitics alike (e.g. Agnew 2002; Bilgin 2004; Hazbun et al. 2012; Ó Tuathail 1996).

Liquid alliances thus bring the shifting alignments that marked the patterns of cooperation and conflict in the Arab Middle East in previous decades to a considerably different level in terms of pace and intensity. While insecurity and weak domestic legitimacy characterised Arab regimes well before 2011, liquid alliances primarily result from extremely heightened regime insecurity following the Arab uprisings, and in the context of shifts occurring both at the regional and international level. With a high degree of fluidity, informality, and volatility, liquid alliances are a qualitatively distinct phenomenon, and clearly a product of the post-2011 period in the Middle East.

By highlighting the centrality of threats to regime survival and their multiple origin, the next section briefly discusses the flurry of regional cooperation via the Arab League and the GCC in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings. We will then turn our attention to the pronounced intensification of threat perceptions after 2013, which led to the prevalence of liquid alliances.

Institutionalized Regional Cooperation: A Flash in the Pan

The early days of the Arab uprisings represented a period of pronounced uncertainty. As regimes tried to navigate through regional power shifts and multiple challenges to their rule, regional cooperation through established

organisations seemed appropriate to collectively balance against both domestic and external threats. The activism of regional organisations in this period was reminiscent of the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Back then, the period of uncertainty had provided a similar impetus to strengthen regional cooperation, which nevertheless quickly receded (Fawcett 2019a, 216–217).

In 2011, long-time authoritarian Arab rulers, including Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Mubarak, and Yemen's Saleh, were ousted by popular revolutions. Libya, Syria, and Bahrain witnessed mass protests against their regimes, soon to be brutally repressed, with Libya descending into a civil war that would eventually lead to the deposal of yet another long-time ruler, al-Qaddafi. The wave of protests also reached Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and, to a lesser extent, the United Arab Emirates.

The electoral victory of Islamist parties in Tunisia in October 2011 and in Egypt a few months later sent shockwaves through authoritarian Arab regimes, particularly those that had drawn their political legitimacy from Islam. It also prompted a repositioning of regional powers. Turkey and Qatar perceived the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as an opportunity to expand their influence, while Saudi Arabia and the Emirates saw it as a threat and thus supported status quo and counter-revolutionary forces in the region (Al-Rasheed 2011; Kamrava 2012). With Syria descending into civil war, regional players backed and armed rival rebel groups with respect to their own geopolitical competition as Iran increasingly meddled in regional affairs as well, most notably in Syria (Abboud 2016; Malmvig et al. 2017; Phillips 2015).

To cope with these far-reaching changes, Arab states first sought to cooperate through both the Arab League and the GCC.⁸ In Libya, the Arab League first called on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to establish a no-fly zone in the country, before going on to support UNSCR 1973 of 17 March 2011, which authorised the international community to use all means necessary (except foreign occupation) to protect civilians. In clear contrast to the Arab League's purpose and tradition of respecting the independence and the sovereignty of its member states, as also stated in the organisation's Charter, the Arab League thus lent legitimacy to Western intervention – that is, NATO airstrikes – in a fellow Arab country.⁹

When it came to Syria, the League suspended the country's membership in November 2011 and imposed sanctions on the Assad regime in the aftermath of its brutal crackdown on the demonstrators. Nineteen of the Arab League's 22 member states supported this package of sanctions, which included a travel ban for senior officials, a freeze on Syrian government assets, a ban on transactions with Syria's central bank, and an end to all commercial transactions.¹⁰ The organisation also sent a monitoring and mediating mission to Syria, which was forced to leave the country in January 2012, however. Simultaneously, it drafted a political transition plan for the country (which was however rejected by

the UNSC). During the Doha summit in March 2013, it went a step further by inviting Syria's opposition coalition to take the country's seat on that occasion.¹¹

The proposal by the Arab League's Secretary-General, Nabil Elaraby, to create a joint Arab military force to fight terrorism and intervene in the conflicts in Yemen and Libya was similarly bold. The Arab League had occasionally attempted to mediate in regional conflicts in the past,¹² but non-interference in regional conflicts had been the rule hitherto. In this case, the countries of the Arab League formally endorsed Elaraby's proposal at its Sharm-el-Sheikh summit in March 2015. The joint force was to be composed of 40,000 soldiers – the subsequent reluctance of several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, ultimately put this initiative on hold (Gaub 2015).

While unprecedented regional turmoil largely explains the Arab League's role in that period, which clearly reflected 'a change in both its initial conception and its general behaviour' (Korany 2013, 93–94), two important additional factors need to be considered. First, there was a short-lived convergence of interests among Gulf countries. Regarding Syria, the Gulf monarchies initially considered the Arab League a useful instrument for countering Iran's growing regional influence, supporting new potential allies in neighbouring countries, ensuring regime survival, and weakening regional rivals.¹³ Second, as the rulers in both Libya and Syria had strained relations to most other Arab states, concerted action against them was unlikely to run into opposition in the Arab League. In the case of Libya specifically, the deep and long-standing animosity between the Gulf rulers and Muammar al-Qaddafi certainly explains their support of interventionist policies.¹⁴ However, the selective support for regime change in Libya and Syria was a slippery slope for the remaining autocratic regimes, considering the popular protests in the region and their own lack of legitimacy. An additional factor that prompted the Arab League's sudden preference for bolder initiatives was the League's proximity to mass demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square, where it has its headquarters, and the subsequent political transition process in that country.¹⁵

The Gulf Cooperation Council, for long considered the best-performing regional organisation in the MENA – often with an 'exceedingly enthusiastic attitude' (Legrenzi 2015, 2) – similarly turned into an active player in the early days of the uprisings.¹⁶ In March 2011, a few days before the Arab League urged the UNSC to establish a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians from al-Qaddafi's raids, the GCC foreign affairs ministers issued a joint communiqué calling for the same measure. Almost at the same time, and on request of the regime in Bahrain, the GCC deployed the Peninsula Shield Force – the organisation's military units – to crack down on the Bahraini protest movement.¹⁷ One month later, the GCC led the efforts to mediate in Yemen, which eventually secured President Abdallah Saleh's resignation later that year. These actions occurred as the organisation was debating on whether to transform itself into a 'Gulf Union' by also extending membership to two non-Gulf Arab

monarchies, Morocco, and Jordan. According to most observers and diplomatic sources, the efforts of the Gulf monarchies to resist the region's winds of political change and to counterbalance the growing Iranian influence motivated these moves.¹⁸ The Gulf regimes thus closed ranks to collectively address a shared threat to stability and regime survival, as a realist reading of these events would have anticipated (Yom and Gause 2012).

The activism of both the Arab League and the GCC was short-lived, however. The emergence and strengthening of the so-called Islamic State (or Daesh) temporarily prompted Arab states such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join forces with Western countries in the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve and through this coalition cooperate with Iraqi security forces. However, as (perceived) threats grew stronger and new ones arose – all the while the regional environment remained volatile – major Arab players soon disagreed on the definition of what constituted a main threat to regime survival (Bianco and Stansfield 2018). These divisions were particularly evident regarding the stance adopted vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood. Indications of such divisions had emerged in 2013 with the coup d'état in Egypt, which Qatar and Turkey had condemned. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other hand, provided much of the financial and logistical support for the new regime and championed the idea of listing the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation.

Deep divisions among the members of the Arab League also emerged regarding the escalating civil war in Syria. While the Gulf countries started supporting rival rebel factions (Abboud 2016; Malmvig et al. 2017; Phillips 2015), Bashar al-Assad secured Russia's support and presented his domestic rivals as terrorists. Differences on Syria also emerged between Egypt's al-Sisi and the country's main Gulf allies as the Egyptian president signalled his relative openness to establishing a dialogue with al-Assad (Kessler 2017). The Egyptian president and the Syrian regime shared their hostility towards Turkey, and, as with his Syrian counterpart, al-Sisi had adopted an anti-terrorist narrative: the Egyptian regime had designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation while the Egyptian army was fighting an insurgency in the Sinai.

The rift between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two ostensible allies, became evident in October 2016. During the siege of Aleppo, the Egyptians voted in favour of a Russian resolution at the United Nations Security Council, in a move that was interpreted as disloyal in Riyadh. The Saudis responded by cutting oil supplies to Egypt. Concurrently, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries opposed the Arab League's plan, backed by the Egyptian government, to establish the aforementioned joint military force. The proposal was quickly shelved and subsequently forgotten.¹⁹

As the Arab League thus reverted to its traditional role, that is, a platform where Arab countries stage their differences, the fate of the

GCC was even worse. While its members considered the suppression of the Bahraini uprising a success of collective action, attempts to transform the GCC into a 'Gulf Union' with tighter economic, military, and political coordination went nowhere. The smaller GCC members, in particular Oman and Kuwait, were hesitant or outright opposed to the Saudi-driven plan to strengthen the cooperation with expanded membership. Their growing hostility towards the proposal, which had gained momentum at the end of 2011 and was tabled again at the GCC's Manama summit in 2016, mainly derived from the concern of the smaller GCC members of losing their foreign policy autonomy in view of Riyadh's ostensible ambitions to dominate the transformed organisation.²⁰

The failure of the 'Gulf Union' project was the prelude to the far more severe crisis that erupted in June 2017. Accusing Doha to support terrorist activities and interfering in the internal affairs of other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar. These four states – the so-called Arab Quartet – also imposed travel and trade bans on the country, in full disrespect of the extensive people-to-people relations among Gulf nationals (Ulrichsen 2018; Sadiki 2020: 24). The background to the accusations was Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood – now considered a serious security threat in Riyadh, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Manama. Herewith related, Qatar's excellent ties with Turkey – whose government was seen as supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood – and the opening of a Turkish military base in Qatar in 2016 made Saudi Arabia and, even more so, the UAE deeply uncomfortable.²¹ A second major point of divergence were Qatar's all-too-friendly relations with Iran, coupled with allegations of collusion between Qatar and various Iranian-backed militias throughout the region.²²

Doha refused to abide by the 13 conditions to lift the boycott, including the demand to close the influential Al-Jazeera TV network and the Turkish military base. Qatar's resolve to resist these pressures received the support from Turkey, and perhaps ironically, Iran. Interestingly, Kuwait and Oman did not align themselves with the anti-Qatar bloc: Kuwait initially sought to mediate in the crisis, and Oman opened its ports to vessels travelling to and from Qatar, with its national airline also offering additional flights to Doha (Bianco and Stansfield 2018: 618).

Although the GCC had witnessed several crises before, the intensity of these events was unprecedented, raising doubts about the very survival of the organisation. The GCC crisis clearly demonstrated that regional organisations were hostage to inter-state and inter-elite rivalries that sprung from divergent threat perceptions, with the GCC incapable of modifying the preferences and threat perceptions of key players or facilitating dialogue.²³

In January 2021, the leaders of the GCC countries finally decided to put an end to the crisis. Reconciliation was staged during a summit of the GCC countries in Al-ʿUla, Saudi Arabia, with concrete actions such as the reopening of borders and

airspace following shortly thereafter. The election of US president Joe Biden provided an important impetus for Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's decision to reset relations with Doha.²⁴ Yet in spite of the attempt at reconciliation at Al-'Ula, diverging threat perceptions and fundamental differences on key issues such as the policy towards Iran or political Islam persisted among the GCC's members.²⁵

Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, collective action via established regional organisations promised to help regimes balance against internal and external threats to their survival, with regional leaders seeking to use these organisations to advance their respective security interests. But what explains the emergence and predominance of liquid alliances against the backdrop of the failure of the established regional organisations to maintain any meaningful role only a few years later? As mentioned earlier and now discussed in greater detail, our explanation focuses on the role of heightened threat perceptions to regime survival amid the persisting fluidity of the regional environment.

Heightened Regime Insecurity

Animosity between regional powers, domestic politics and shifting patterns of external influence all became important obstacles to cooperate via established regional institutions (Fawcett 2019a, 212). It is equally true that the uprisings did not change the basic features of the region: as the Middle East and North Africa witnessed a general authoritarian resilience, the region remained dominated by inward-looking domestic coalitions and regimes (Solingen 2015).²⁶ Yet the main reason for the emergence and multiplication of liquid alliances following the uprisings lies in the growing gap in the perception of threats by major regional players amid a dramatically heightened sense of regime insecurity. These gaps emerged around several issues, forging several different but overlapping cleavages. Importantly, (perceived) threats to regime survival originated at different levels of analysis that are nevertheless deeply intertwined (Del Sarto, Malmvig, and Soler i Lecha 2019).

Regional developments and their interplay with domestic politics were a major source of heightened regime insecurity. Obviously, the removal of several Arab rulers in the region reinforced the security concerns of those who survived. As Syria, Libya and Yemen descended into civil war, an array of armed non-state actors and jihadi groups emerged. These actors further contributed to state erosion in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen (Collombier et al. 2018; Gause 2022) while also challenging the sovereignty of states such as Egypt and Tunisia. The 'Islamic State' and its regional affiliates emerged in this period as well, displaying a hitherto unseen brutality while also conquering territory across Iraq and Syria. Moreover, while political Islam witnessed a growing internal fragmentation, it still seemed to win over pan-Arabism in the competition for popular support across the region.

As a pronounced lack of domestic legitimacy continued to characterise most Arab regimes (e.g., Del Sarto 2017; Fawcett 2017; Hudson 2015; Salloukh 2017), rulers responded by augmenting repression and violence at home and by strengthening the role of the security apparatus (Lynch 2016, 2018). In a number of Gulf monarchies, the heightened level of mistrust even led the rulers to question the loyalty of the members of their own royal families. For instance, the detention of senior members of the Saudi family in 2017 to allegedly fight corruption was not only a public relations stunt by Mohammad bin Salman. It also indicated that the Saudi Crown Prince was afraid of manoeuvres against him from within his family.²⁷ At the same time, regimes rearranged domestic support coalitions and aligned with external actors in the region. In a replay of the so-called Arab Cold War of the 1960s (Kerr 1971), Arab regimes started meddling massively in the internal affairs of neighbouring states in their attempts to undermine their regional rivals while supporting local clients (Valbjørn and Bank 2012; Ryan 2012; Salloukh 2017, 660). The manipulation and securitisation of sectarian identities at home and abroad served as a major strategy in this context (Hashemi and Postel 2017; Darwich and Fakhoury 2016). For the major Gulf monarchies, sectarian securitisation also served the purpose of legitimising the status quo domestically and advancing the counter-revolution at the regional level (Al-Rasheed 2011; Kamrava 2012).

Developments at the intersection of regional and international politics nurtured additional threats to regime survival. The uprisings unleashed processes of fragmentation while exacerbating the impact of earlier events, most notably the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (e.g., Fawcett 2023). This includes the intensified accentuation and securitisation of the Sunni-Shia divide that had emerged in the context of the growing antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran after 2003 (Matthiessen 2013; Wehrey 2014), as noted earlier. Comparable to the end of the Cold War, the uprisings also prompted a reconfiguration of regional power structures as established or aspiring regional powers increased their involvement in the region. After 2013, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran grew steadily more entangled with a region-wide inter-Sunni confrontation pitting Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Egypt against Qatar and Turkey. This divide revolved around the position towards the Muslim Brotherhood, perceived as either a serious threat or an opportunity to expand influence, as mentioned earlier (Gause 2014; Lynch 2016).

The 2008 global financial crisis had strengthened the Gulf monarchies as they bought up European and US assets on the cheap and rescued struggling Western economies through their sovereign wealth funds (Soubrier 2019). However, US President Barack Obama's apparent support for the Arab uprisings, his anticipated 'pivot to Asia', and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE to feel increasingly insecure and thus pursue their own plans for the region. Russia's interventionism against the backdrop of the United States' disengagement further increased the level of uncertainty in the region on

a massive scale (Hazbun 2019; Monier 2015). With a growing number of potential allies on offer, Egypt and other regional powers revived Nasser's policy of playing the US and Russia (then the USSR) against each other.

The Prevalence of Liquid Alliances

With the demise of regional cooperation via established organisations, the ongoing violence in the region, and the prospects of a shifting geopolitical environment, the volatility of the region increased. Threats originating at different but intersecting levels of analysis multiplied amid a growing number of overlapping cleavages. As these developments strengthened the regimes' sense of insecurity, and with traditional and potential allies increasingly considered unreliable and unpredictable,²⁸ liquid alliances became prevalent.

Several actors have been involved in such alignments, but Saudi Arabia stands out as the most prominent driver. While Riyadh initially favoured the active involvement of the Arab League and the GCC in regional politics, it soon realised that there were serious 'shortcomings of existing institutions in meeting the kingdom's security needs' (Miller and Cardaun 2020, 1516). To a large extent, Riyadh's foreign policy ambitions were nurtured by Iran's growing assertiveness in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and the persistent protests in Shia-populated areas of the country, which Riyadh accused Tehran of fomenting.²⁹ The family intrigues at the royal court mentioned earlier and the perceived betrayal by its traditional ally and security provider, the US, mainly but not exclusively because of the Iran nuclear deal, created a multi-layered and acute sense of insecurity, pushing the Saudi crown prince to explore alternative partnerships.³⁰

Thus, the Saudi regime created a coalition of nine countries to intervene militarily in Yemen in March 2015, aimed at supporting the internationally recognised (and pro-Saudi) Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was ousted by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.³¹ Named 'Operation Decisive Storm', the military campaign consisted of bombings, a naval blockade, and the deployment of ground forces into Yemen. This initiative overlapped and arguably neutralised the aforementioned proposal of Egypt and the Arab League to create an Arab Joint Military force.³² In parallel, in a move described as an attempt to 'downgrade those cooperation frameworks that Saudi rulers were not able to fully control and command',³³ Riyadh also delayed the payment of its contribution to the Arab League's secretariat and (unsuccessfully) proposed to reduce the League's diplomatic representations around the world.

The second Saudi-led attempt to balance against both Iran and domestic threats to regime survival was the establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), created in December 2015. With its headquarters in Riyadh, this alliance defines itself as a 'willing coalition of 41 countries that forms a pan-Islamic unified front in the global fight against

terrorism and violent extremism' (IMCTC 2017). The coalition is loosely organised, lacks a founding treaty, and has an opaque internal governance structure.³⁴ Interestingly, several Muslim majority countries, including Iraq and Algeria, refused to join this Saudi-led project; unsurprisingly, Iran was not invited to join. Qatar, a founding member of the IMCTC, was later expelled.

The formation of the so-called 'Arab Quartet' against the backdrop of the Qatar diplomatic crisis represents the Saudis' third attempt to establish alternative – and 'liquid' – patterns of regional cooperation. The Quartet is extremely informal and loose. Its main and perhaps only goal has been to coordinate attempts with the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt to isolate and boycott Qatar. It remains to be seen whether the Quartet may find a different *raison d'être*, should intra-GCC reconciliation consolidate.

The Qatar crisis also witnessed a considerable strengthening of the bilateral ties between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In a surprise announcement during the GCC summit in Kuwait in December 2017, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi decided to set up a joint committee for cooperation and coordination on military, political, economic, trade and cultural matters. The timing of the announcement was both an affront to Kuwait's efforts to mediate in the Qatar crisis and an attempt to derail the GCC summit in the Kuwaiti capital.³⁵ Underscoring the political relevance of this initiative, the then crown prince of Abu Dhabi and *de facto* ruler of the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed – one of the most powerful figures in the Middle East – was put in charge of the initiative. The Saudi-UAE tandem was a clear exercise in alliance formation to balance against internal and external threats.

As Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE were actively involved in these alternative forms of regional cooperation, they were often portrayed as solid allies. However, and as noted earlier, liquid forms of regional cooperation do not assure consistent policies across the board among their allies. This is because liquid alliances typically respond to the multiplicity of threats across different levels of analysis and the existence of overlapping cleavages in a volatile environment. Indeed, these three states have maintained different – and often shifting – policies on major regional conflicts in the region including Syria, Yemen, Libya and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

On Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt had a major public spat in 2016. Egypt's diverging vote at the UN Security Council resulted in Saudi Arabia cutting oil supply to Egypt, as noted earlier. Similarly, the UAE went from maintaining a low profile on Syria to reopen its embassy in Damascus in 2018, and it subsequently openly advocated for Syria's reintegration into the Arab League (Reuters 2018).³⁶

As regards the conflict in Yemen, Egypt's contribution to the Saudi-led military campaign was very modest. Concurrently, the Emirates tended to prioritise the fight against al-Qaeda and other *takfiri* groups instead of combating the Houthis. Thus, despite the alliance between the two assertive crown princes, Saudi Arabia and the UAE fell out over the Yemen war,

with Abu Dhabi increasingly investing in supporting the secessionist movement in Southern Yemen. The UAE thus engaged with the Southern Transitional Council whereas Saudi Arabia supported Yemen's officially recognised government.

On Libya, one of the main scenarios of the 'intra-Sunni cold war' (Gause 2014), Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt have also pursued different strategies following the collapse of the political transition after the contested 2014 elections. Egypt and the UAE supported Khalifa Haftar's military operations against the Tripoli government, backed by Qatar and Turkey.³⁷ In contrast, Saudi Arabia has not been militarily involved in the war in Libya, even though Mohammad bin Salman agreed to meet with Haftar in March 2019, a few days before Haftar's failed offensive against Tripoli. Rather than investing in military actors, Riyadh decided to support the expansion of the Salafi Madkhali movement across the whole country and not only in Haftar-dominated areas.³⁸

Divisions among Arab states have also emerged regarding the stance towards Israel. Relations between al-Sisi's Egypt and the government in Jerusalem have improved notably, mainly because of their joint opposition to the Palestinian Hamas – originally an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The two countries also share an interest in fighting the Islamic State-affiliated insurgency in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula at Israel's southern border. It has fostered a considerable degree of covert military and intelligence cooperation, as once (and probably rashly) acknowledged by al-Sisi in public (Kirkpatrick 2019). Shared hostility towards Iran and its allies has also forged a new rapprochement between Israel and several Arab monarchies, with the UAE and Bahrain formally establishing diplomatic relations with Israel in August 2020, followed by Morocco and Sudan in early 2021. Saudi Arabia increased intelligence cooperation with Israel, too, but has not normalised relations, fearing that such a move could undermine its legitimacy as a leader of the 'Muslim world'.³⁹ Other states, such as Algeria, Kuwait and Lebanon, vehemently oppose any normalisation of relations with Israel as long as the conflict with the Palestinians is not resolved.

As noted earlier, liquid alliances are not confined to state actors. The Syrian conflict prompted divisions within the traditional 'axis of resistance', which includes Syria, Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas. As Hamas decided to support the opposition to the Assad regime in the erupting Syrian civil war, it broke its traditional links with Damascus and challenged the strategy of Iran on this specific conflict. With the Hamas overseas leadership moving from Damascus to Doha, Qatar became the main financial backer of Hamas – with Israel's tacit approval (Harel 2019). In 2019 ties between the Palestinian organisation and Iran appeared to be restored (Al-Mughrabi 2019), pointing once more to the ubiquity of 'liquid' alliances in the contemporary Middle East. Other examples of non-state actors entering liquid alliances include Yemen's Transitional Council aligning itself with the UAE; the Houthis partnering with Iran; the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar teaming up with the UAE and Egypt;

and the participation of Shia and Kurdish militias in the international campaigns to recapture Mosul and Raqqa from ISIS.

Conclusions

The turmoil and uncertainty triggered by the Arab uprising initially prompted an unprecedented degree of activism by established regional organisations, most notably the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. In the first two years following the outbreak of popular unrest, several Arab states engaged in regional cooperation via these established institutions in their efforts to maintain or restore the old order and balance against external threats. However, the regionalist momentum in the Arab core of the MENA region started to fade away in 2013, proving to be a flash in the pan. In the face of regional conflicts of unprecedented intensity that in some cases resulted in state collapse, power shifts, overlapping securitisation dynamics, growing perceptions of regime vulnerability, and increasingly diverging threat perceptions among major players, regional organisations fell hostage to the dynamics of regional fragmentation. In their place emerged various loosely institutionalised and rapidly shifting alignments. Case-by-case, opportunistic and ever-changing alliances in the form of multi-national coalitions and strengthened bilateral relations became the main template for balancing against external and internal threats. Liquid alliances became the new normal. Our explanation of the patterns of regional cooperation in the Middle East thus underscores the role of the heightened sense of regime insecurity and diverging threat perceptions in a period of pronounced uncertainty and 'liquidity', to use Bauman's terminology.

Our analysis allows for four main conclusions. First, alliance formation in the Middle East still follows the logic of the balancing against threats, as astutely observed by Walt. However, our analysis confirms that concerns with regime survival are the main drivers of this process. Region-wide domestic vulnerability and an extreme preoccupation with regime security (which notably differ from any real or constructed national security concern) explain why key regional powers were keen to engage in regional cooperation via established institutions at the beginning of the Arab uprising. After 2013, however, inter-regional cleavages deepened and multiplied, and regional turmoil intensified as Syria, Yemen and Libya descended into civil wars. Heightened regime insecurity and shifting perceptions of what (or who) constituted a main threat to the regime, thus drove the proliferation of liquid alliances. In theoretical terms, the fluctuating threat perceptions and unstable patterns of balancing against internal and external threat discussed here validate a constructivist perspective on the definition of threats and their salience, whereby agency and structure are mutually constitutive. This means that Walt's balance of threats approach is far less realist than widely assumed: this theory must be read through a constructivist lens to fully unfold its explanatory power.

Second, in addition to the question of how threats are constructed, domestic factors need to be accounted for when adopting a balance of threat approach to the region. Post-Arab uprisings, repeated attempts by regional players to meddle in the internal affairs of their rivals by supporting local clients point to the importance of the interplay between domestic and regional factors. Conversely, authoritarian regimes have been constructing almost any domestic opposition to their rule as inspired or orchestrated by external forces. Domestic and external threats to regime survival – and perceptions of these threats – are thus strongly interlinked and cut across each other. Concurrently, the dominant domestic features of the states in the region continue to determine the patterns of cooperation and conflict and thus of the regional order in the Middle East. As the region remains dominated by inward-looking and repressive regimes, the potential for regional cooperation remains slim. Since the surviving regimes remain obsessed with their survival, the chances that outward-looking domestic coalitions and cooperative foreign policy strategies will emerge have significantly diminished.

Third, while prioritising the domestic and regional level as the main sources of threat perceptions and the actors promoting these, the policies of local actors must also be located within the shifting patterns of the region's external permeation. Washington's diminished engagement in the region and the growing influence of Russia and China additionally raised the level of insecurity, particularly among traditional US allies in the region. The growing multipolarity of both the international and the regional system, coupled to the emergence of different and overlapping cleavages, also offered local actors a greater choice on the 'menu' of potential allies. These factors contributed to the salience of liquid alliances and thus augmented the region's volatility. But the prevailing (and largely unsubstantiated) *perception* of an American retreat from the region under the time span under consideration also confirms the relevance of intersubjective processes of social construction and the power of geopolitical discourses and representations in shaping realities.

Finally, insecurity is not only a crucial condition that explains the assertive and partly unpredictable foreign policy behaviour of major states in the region and the emergence of liquid alliances. Their erratic balancing tactics and attempts to influence the regional order in turn contribute to a high level of regional instability and insecurity. Insecurity is thus not only the condition that enables these policies but also their *outcome*. The resulting vicious cycle of insecurity, violence, and repression has become a key feature of contemporary regional politics in the Middle East (Del Sarto 2021).

Several recent developments in the Middle East may point to the emergence of 'less fluid' sets of alignments. These include the repair of the GCC rift, the 'Abraham Accords' linking a greater number of Arab states to Israel, the China-brokered normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Iran of March 2023, the readmission of the Syrian regime to the Arab League in

May of the same year, and the recent invitation to Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, and Egypt to join the BRICS group of developing countries. However, as the region finds itself in an important phase of transition (Del Sarto, Malmvig, and Soler i Lecha 2019), these are just additional examples of the ongoing processes of regrouping and realignment. Yet, the peculiar dynamics of regime insecurity, threat perceptions, and violence described here, and the unlikeliness for these to dramatically change soon, support the idea that 'liquid alliances', rather than solid institutions, will continue to mark the patterns of cooperation and conflict in the region in the years to come. Whether the patterns of regionalism and alliance formation identified here are observable in other parts of the world certainly deserves further investigation.

Notes

1. We acknowledge the contested nature of the Middle East (and North Africa) as a term and the fact that the Middle East has been framed by outsiders according to their specific interests (Bilgin 2004). Yet the MENA region can be defined as a security complex (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) – or as several overlapping security complexes (Halliday 2005; Hinnebusch 2003; Lawson 2006). Moreover, while political, economic and cultural heterogeneity marks the region at large, Arab Middle Eastern states are deeply interconnected at the societal, cultural and identity level (Barnett 1998).
2. Studies within these theoretical traditions tend to focus on states as the main actors in the (inter)subjective definition of threats. While less studied empirically, these approaches postulate however that societal actors also contribute to the production and reproduction of threat perceptions.
3. Whether material or ideational factors prevail in the assessment of threats depends on both the type of the regime's identity construction (fluid versus fixed) and the range of policy options deriving from the relative distribution of power.
4. Conversely, a prevalence of internationalising domestic coalitions in a region increases the likelihood of regional cooperation, such as in East Asia.
5. It would be worth exploring to what extent our analytical framework 'speaks' to the literature on ontological (in)security (e.g., Darwich 2016; Mitzen 2006). However, this would go beyond the scope of this article.
6. We consciously use the term international 'permeation' instead of 'penetration' (of the Middle East) because it departs from an Orientalist and gendered perception of the region while also allowing consideration of bi-directionality.
7. In an era of constant change, uncertainty and fragility, ad hoc and individual solutions to collective problems are the norm while collective long-term planning is no longer possible (Bauman 2000).
8. According to a GCC official interviewed in Riyadh (December 2017), in this period 'no individual state could tackle the challenges alone'.
9. Interviews with Arab and European diplomats (Cairo, February 2018).
10. Iraq abstained, Lebanon dissociated from those sanctions, and Algeria expressed some reservations.

11. This was an isolated decision taken by the host country. It was discontinued in subsequent summits and did not impact on the daily work of the organisation. Interview with a retired Arab diplomat (Cairo, February 2018).
12. The Arab League attempted to mediate in the civil war in Yemen in the 1960s, during the Lebanese civil war, and in Darfur and Somalia in the early 2000s (Pinafari 2009, 2013).
13. Interview with a diplomat from a GCC state (Cairo, February 2018).
14. Interviews with a Libyan diplomat (Cairo, February 2018); interview with a European diplomat (Riyadh, December 2017).
15. This point was raised in several interviews with Arab League officials and European diplomats working with the Arab League (Cairo, February 2018). Insiders suggested that then-Secretary-General Amr Moussa's intention to play an active role in Egyptian politics (he was one of the candidates in the 2012 presidential elections) also bolstered his proposals to raise the international profile of the Arab League.
16. The GCC was established in May 1981, following the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 and two years after both the revolution in Iran and Saddam Hussein's rise to power in neighbouring Iraq. It reflected the attempts of the Arab Gulf monarchies to address shared security threats. While the six member states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – achieved a significant degree of economic cooperation, the creation of the Peninsula Shield Force in 1984 established security cooperation. The small number of its members, strong family and cultural ties, similar governing structures and comparable socio-economic traits contributed to the success of the organisation during the first decades of its existence.
17. In the intervention in Bahrain, the force mainly comprised contingents from Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
18. Interviews with GCC officials and European diplomats (Riyadh, December 2017); interviews with Arab diplomats (Cairo, February 2018).
19. Interviews conducted at the Arab League in Cairo, February 2018.
20. Oman was most critical towards the plan, with Muscat even threatening to quit the organisation over the proposal. Kuwait expressed reservations, while Qatar neither opposed nor supported it.
21. Online interview with a Turkish diplomat (February 2018).
22. Cozy ties between then-US President Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman were probably an enabling factor in Riyadh's decision to boycott Qatar (no matter that Qatar hosts the largest US military base in the Middle East).
23. Interviews with GCC officials (Riyadh, December 2017); interview with a Saudi diplomat (Madrid, December 2017).
24. As close allies of Trump, they had every interest in directing signs of goodwill towards the new US president, fearing that US policy under Biden could harm their interests. For instance, they feared a review of arms sales, and end to the support for the war in Yemen, or a more vocal policy on human rights abuses.
25. Interview with Qatari diplomat (online, February 2021).
26. In fact, the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms some decades earlier had not produced a prevalence of regionalising logics, as the neoliberal credo anticipated. Resulting in the restructuring of economic and political power around small cliques (Guazzone and Pioppi 2009), rampant corruption and crony capitalism became entrenched instead (Diwan, Malik, and Atiyas 2019).
27. Interview with a retired official from a GCC state (Riyadh, December 2017). There were also rumours of disputes among senior members of the Qatari royal family, both in 2017 and in 2020.
28. Interview with an Egyptian diplomat (Cairo, February 2018).

29. Interview with a GCC official (Riyadh, December 2017).
30. Interview with a retired Saudi official (Riyadh, December 2017).
31. Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Egypt participated in the Saudi-led military campaign, with the U.S. providing intelligence and logistical support and the UK deploying some personnel as well.
32. Interviews conducted at the Arab League (Cairo, February 2018).
33. Interview with a retired Egyptian diplomat (Cairo, February 2018).
34. As described by a Riyadh-based European diplomat specialised in security-related matters (Riyadh, December 2017).
35. Interview with a European diplomat (Riyadh, December 2017).
36. According to a retired Egyptian diplomat, this was yet another illustration of the conflicting aims of Emirati foreign policies. He argued that despite the ‘alliance’ with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the UAE’s position on Syria reflected Abu Dhabi’s growing hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood – a group with strong links to Qatar that is active among the Syrian rebels – as well as its consistent support for authoritarian rulers across the region (interview, Cairo, February 2018).
37. This has been confirmed on several occasions by the UN panel monitoring the international arms embargo on Libya.
38. The Madkhali movement originates in Saudi Arabia and is a branch of Salafism. It vehemently opposes the Muslim Brotherhood and tends to be supportive of conservative Arab regimes.
39. Interview with a Saudi official (Madrid, December 2017).

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