



The International Spectator

Italian Journal of International Affairs

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rspe20>

The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of 'Normlessness' in Gulf Regionalism

Larbi Sadiki & Layla Saleh

To cite this article: Larbi Sadiki & Layla Saleh (2020) The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of 'Normlessness' in Gulf Regionalism, *The International Spectator*, 55:2, 1-16, DOI: [10.1080/03932729.2020.1747287](https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1747287)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1747287>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 10 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3646



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 6 View citing articles [↗](#)

The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of ‘Normlessness’ in Gulf Regionalism

Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh

Qatar University, Doha

ABSTRACT

In a field that is so loosely theorised, an investigation into intra-GCC conflict is both apposite and challenging. Empirically, interventions by Gulf states have proliferated across the GCC and MENA since 2011. This Special Issue seeks to fill a void in scholarship by looking at the ongoing crisis through the lens of norms. A hypothesised ‘normlessness’ has taken root: a collapse of (local) guiding principles, some even laid down by member states. Disregard for norms of non-intervention, popular sovereignty, mediation, alliance-making and social solidarity poses risks for (sub)regional stability. Provisionally, one notable weakness lies in prescriptive and proscriptive (regulative) norms pertaining to intra-GCC rules of engagement.

KEYWORDS

GCC; normlessness; non-intervention; sovereignty; non-Western IR; Islamic IR

This Special Issue of *The International Spectator* attempts to reread the Gulf blockade/crisis critically through the prism of International Relations (IR) and Political Science. The emphasis is on norm-making and un-making, with special reference to what we call “normlessness” in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) subregion. The set of articles conducts a provisional disaggregation of norms: democratic integration (Larbi Sadiki), conflict resolution and diplomacy (Beverley Milton-Edwards), mediation (Ibrahim Fraihat) and alliance-making (Layla Saleh; Birol Başkan and Özgür Pala; Cinzia Bianco). It therefore offers some perspectives on fluid political dynamics that are still in the offing. Admittedly, we encountered the problem of analysis without hindsight, or what scholars might term the *longue durée*. There are limitations to how much can be even tentatively suggested about a conflict not yet resolved.

Issues of ‘objectivity’ and ‘credibility’ must be taken with a sense of tentativeness. Still, what has been written on the topic so far seems to sideline the relevance of norm-making and un-making. We find that this constitutes a gap in scholarly considerations of the current (2017-) crisis. There may be an identifiable “pre-GCC blockade/crisis” and a “post-GCC blockade/crisis” in terms of state discourse and policies. What has changed? Our take on this matter is that state-state relations, which do not seem to be guided by key international norms on conflict resolution, alliances and democratic regionalism, suddenly demand attention. Certainly, norms, be they political or social, are sometimes paradigmatically contested. They raise questions regarding the changing interplay between interests and identities, values and behaviour in the subregion. The articles

contained in this Special Issue attempt to tease out some of these pertinent issues in a fresh and timely manner. The individual contributions are underpinned by the loose theoretical framework ('soft theory') of normlessness outlined below, in the context of a changing (sub)regional environment. An overview of the articles is followed by a reflection on vistas for further research.

The departure point of this Special Issue is that subregional politics in the six-member GCC, and the regional politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) more broadly, involve more than just dynamics of comparative military capabilities. Sub- and transnational identities – not limited to Arabism or Islamism (Telhami and Barnett 2002; see also Baabood 2003) – are also central. Ideational factors, or how norms and identities are constituted, an emphasis associated with the constructivist school of International Relations, have long been identified as salient to the study of IR in the Middle East. Transnational identities may play a regime-bolstering role, enhancing the domestic legitimacy of rulers (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2016).

Our social constructivist approach ontologically considers norms and identities as intertwined with state (and non-state) behaviour. (International) politics is social, with mutually reinforcing structure and agency (Onuf 1987; Wendt 1999). Yet the dynamic status (content, impact, effects) of norms must be empirically examined on a contextualised, case-by-case basis. In this sense, we contribute to an ongoing debate, particularly in the MENA and the GCC, which is often analysed in realist terms, between dismissals of norms because "these theories do not accurately describe the world" (Mearsheimer 1994-1995, 49) and more affirmative accounts (Klotz 1999) that see norms made actionable by transnational coalitions (for example, in the economic sanctions against South Africa's apartheid regime). Consequently, the Special Issue's theoretically and methodologically eclectic set of articles might be read through a loosely "realist-constructivist" prism (Barkin 2003). That is, an examination of norms in the Middle East or Gulf need not assume that contests over power (material capabilities or otherwise) crowd out the propensity to explore how constructed identities are expressed through, and reinforced by, intersubjective understandings of appropriate behaviour.

The current post-2011 context

As the Arab Spring took the region by storm, GCC monarchs were just as unsettled by the *hirak*, or popular mobilisation (Sadiki 2016) of their "unruly" publics as their republican counterparts. These popular forces "spook[ed] the state's security apparatuses" (Sadiki 2015, 311). Gulf rulers were quick to 'securitise' unrest, in Bahrain and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), especially against restive populations in Eastern Saudi Arabia, responding swiftly and unapologetically in an unprecedented flexing of muscles, most notably through the Peninsula Shield Force.

To varying degrees, Gulf states' behaviour was a reactive counterforce to the Arab Spring *hirak*, inside and outside of the GCC subregion. Indeed, since 2011, examples of GCC intervention abound in a region characterised by extensive realignments: KSA, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Bahrain in Yemen, with Qatar leaving the 'alliance' after the blockade against it by other GCC members and Egypt; to varying degrees and in varying ways, Gulf interventions in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Egypt. Similarly, KSA and Israel are pitted against Iran; so are KSA and the US, also

vs Iran; KSA, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt formed the anti-Qatar Quartet in the aforementioned blockade. In this crisis, Iran and Turkey sided with Qatar.

Some scholars have begun to explore this phenomenon of increasing Gulf intervention in recent years. Enabled by new international investment profits, “emerging interventionists” Qatar and the UAE have departed from a long-standing history more respectful of state sovereignty, intervening militarily and financially in “unprecedented” ways (Young 2013). This contest over influence with hegemony-prone Saudi Arabia ricochets back to impact the GCC and not just the broader MENA region. Some have noted that the 2012 security agreement between GCC countries allowed for extradition and information sharing, for instance, in a manner that essentially codifies breaches of the norm of non-intervention (Cooley 2015).

What we are witnessing, then, appears to be the expansion of interventionist behaviour. Non-intervention as a long-standing international norm (Kant 1795; Mill 1859) was initially flouted only outside the GCC in the broader Middle East region. Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and even Tunisia are prime examples. Now, it has boomeranged back to the GCC. The blockade/crisis of 2017 is a case in point.

‘Normlessness’ in the GCC?

What we mean by normlessness is the collapse of guiding principles or values, dislodging state behaviour from declared identities and moralities. It involves a breakdown in the rules of conduct of state elites. On the one hand, norms manifests themselves empirically. Norms are either “regulative”, that is, “prescrib[ing], proscrib[ing], or order[ing] behaviour” (Bjorkdahl 2002, 15), or “constitutive”: they “give meaning to action” (16). On the other hand, normlessness, as we tentatively conceptualise it, concerns the disintegration of normative standards, for, as is often seemingly forgotten, norms have a “deontic or normative element” (Raymond 1997, 217). In analysing norms, we are not exploring only patterns of behaviour deemed appropriate or inappropriate (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), but also value assessments as they guide (or do not guide) behaviour.

The normlessness hypothesised here refers to the contradictions relating to application of the basic norm of sovereignty (and non-intervention) in the contemporary global order. There appears to be a hierarchy in the standards, expectations and practices of intervention and norms deriving from the principle of sovereignty. While the latest research on international norms pertains to “robustness” and “contestation” over norms of torture, women in combat, international crime and the Responsibility to Protect (Deitelhoff and Zimmerman 2019), none of them relate to the overarching norm of sovereignty (particularly within regions). The question may not be, then, the *contestability* of the norm of non-intervention, but its seemingly increasing irrelevance to (unconstrained) state behaviour within the GCC and beyond. The (sub)regional normative order itself is on shaky ground. This does not mean that analytical interest in norms which permeate GCC discourses, as will be discussed below, should be abandoned. We argue that this is not just a matter of (ill)functioning institutions, but also deep-rooted problems in the very norms these institutions engender to keep themselves in place. For this reason, this Special Issue attempts to tackle various facets and cases of what we call normlessness. We argue that GCC states, particularly in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, seem to be undermining their own publicly expressed stances. They violate standards that

they have set for themselves, for instance in the GCC Charter. At the same time, GCC political systems are increasingly characterised by personalist politics (Sadiki 2015, 304) as Gulf states step into a void left by historically regional heavyweights weakened by war (Syria, Iraq) or political instability (Egypt). The breaking of social norms with important Islamic resonance is also a part of this hypothesised normlessness. As a result, a working hypothesis in this Special Issue is that *all* people in the subregion and broader region are paying a price for the extended crisis. The price is partly economic, predicted by the World Bank as USD 2 trillion in the next 15 years (Diapola 2020). But the Gulf blockade/crisis itself is taking a much greater toll, as Islamic and tribal bonds have been shaken. This is an intriguing question: how a region witnessing a collapse of Westphalian-type norms (namely sovereignty) simultaneously experiences a breakdown in tribal and religious norms of solidarity.

The behaviour of GCC states since 2011 raises important questions. Indeed, another working hypothesis might be that some forms of GCC involvement since 2011 (for example, in Yemen, Syria and Libya) have contributed to, rather than helped avert, state ‘fragility’ or ‘failure’. The Gulf states are not actors with a pedigree of regional stature on a par with Egypt, Iraq or Syria. The power they project is arguably largely financial. Certainly, they are not global players, in the manner of Russia or China. Nor are they liberal states, those counter-terrorism warriors that masquerade as champions of democracy and human rights. Spiking suddenly after the Arab Spring, the regional interventionism of GCC states, with their weak military capacities – recent weapons-purchasing bonanzas notwithstanding – presents an analytical and empirical puzzle. Pressing questions arise about how and why “the Gulf has replaced the Mashreq/Levant as the epicentre of geopolitical rivalries” in the Middle East (Del Sarto *et al.* 2019, 33).

This is where the articles in this Special Issue step in. They attempt to explore the new regional consequentiality of the Gulf states that appears to have fostered neither peace nor stability, internally (within the GCC) or externally (outside of the GCC). In light of the above, GCC interventionism, utilising both hard and soft power, is reflective of normlessness, where the most basic rule governing or constraining state behaviour – respect for sovereignty – is ignored. Normlessness imperils all regional actors. It underlies the “weakness of internal consensus” in the GCC (Ulrichsen 2015, 9) that feeds into present and future insecurities in the subregion. As has been noted, the interventionist thrust compromises any “internal unity” of the GCC (Ehteshami 2015).

Even before the 2011 uprisings, the GCC had long been described as falling short of a “security community” in which shared norms, values and identity make war among its members unthinkable. Instead, the GCC had been dubbed a “classic security alliance” (Barnett and Gause 1998, 161). Still, state elites may have lagged behind society. Michael Barnett and Gregory Gause (1998) observe the development of a shared *khaliji* identity among the peoples of GCC states. Yet this bottom-up ‘we-ness’ has not been enough to stave off the series of intra-Gulf crises that culminated in the 2017 blockade/crisis by the aforementioned Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt).

The articles in this Issue address this crisis by marshalling evidence from several case studies. They examine questions pertaining to the erosion of norms of regional integration, alliance-building, diplomacy and conflict resolution and mediation. Norms and the hints of normlessness preliminarily conceptualised here thus form a relatively cohesive theoretical umbrella for a diversity of perspectives exploring the current crisis. The task,

then, is how to transpose theory taken from other regions onto the empirical specificities of the ‘local’ GCC subregion. This is an acute challenge when broaching norms of (non) intervention that flow from Westphalian sovereignty. Yet IR theories of the realist, liberal and constructivist varieties remain helpful in guiding us as we attempt to understand norms and normlessness in the GCC and the Middle East. We do not wish to relegate the GCC subregion, so connected to the rest of the world, to a state of Orientalist exceptionalism, outside the scope of IR theory altogether.

In seeking to theorise the new politics of Gulf interventionism through the lens of norms and normlessness, the Special Issue probes the following salient features:

- (1) The extreme unpredictability of regional politics, both within the GCC and across the MENA region. If the eruption of the 2017 blockade/crisis was unforeseen by many, the outlook for its resolution is equally unclear at the time of writing. The region is more ‘penetrated’ than ever by international (US, Russia) and regional (Turkey, Iran) external actors, with the GCC states as the new interveners in interlocking dynamics and perceptions of domestic and regional security. This poses an immense challenge for scholarship, not only in terms of source material often mired in propagandistic accounts (for or against Qatar, or for or against the Arab Quartet). Interpreting the interests and behaviours of the actors involved becomes daunting. Revisiting the norms framework, which lends itself to charting the contours of *shifting* narratives and interactions, helps ground the wide-ranging analyses in these articles, in which prediction is very difficult.
- (2) The more activist and militarised foreign policies of GCC states since 2011. The rise of Gulf intervention is the forceful insertion of regional parties into the jurisdiction of sovereign Arab states. On the one hand, regional intervention seeks international endorsement: under the guise of international society (especially the US) defending norms of peace, legitimacy, democracy. Yet, this undermines the norm of non-intervention underpinning much of IR theory. Thus, non-intervention has been relinquished to intervention in the roguish manner common among Gulf states. This normless practice of Gulf-MENA politics is being routinised, even though it violates a principle of international law that prescribes conventional and acceptable behaviour among nation-states.
- (3) The array of state tools and instruments of power: both soft – financial and media (Nye 2004) – and, increasingly, hard – military (including by proxy). Perennially linked to great powers such as the US (or increasingly, Russia), Gulf intervention may rely on US indifference, inertia, or participation and endorsement. Ultimately, this threatens the normative structure of regional and international politics.
- (4) The major and ever-shifting regional realignments, motivated to a great extent by regime security concerns (Ryan 2015). GCC states have been at the forefront of such changing regional dynamics, vis-à-vis Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Turkey and, of course, each other. At the same time, Middle East state borders, despite their deplored “artificiality”, have proven relatively “robust” even with respect to challenges to sovereignty and the wars engulfing the region since 2011 (Fawcett 2017). Examining norms and normlessness in intervention is one way to investigate how relative ‘constants’ such as state borders interface with changing alliance and counter-alliance patterns inside and outside the GCC.

- (5) Palestine as the lynchpin of war and peace in the region, despite the proliferation of wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. New are the deep divisions on the Palestinian cause and relations with Israel, for instance with regard to US President Donald Trump's dramatically and anti-climactically unwrapped "Deal of the Century". The GCC is split on Palestine, even as Arab publics generally remain staunch supporters of the Palestinian cause, pushing elites and public opinion further apart (Del Sarto *et al.* 2019, 1-8). Long-standing regional and sub-regional norms of support for Palestine are now publicly contested, arguably spilling over into other norms in GCC relations ranging from alliance-making to conflict mediation.

Norms in the Arab and GCC setting

Norms (and normlessness) represent a rich field for inquiry into the international relations of the Middle East. Analysis of norm-making rests on assumptions that identities, ideas and values are central to understanding politics below, through and above the level of the state. Identities guide and govern what political actors do, imbuing behaviour with a valuative dimension that cannot be reduced to merely a materialist or 'rationalist' calculus, even where the state is concerned.

To this end, more critical postcolonial approaches look into the formulation and implementation of liberal norms extracted from Western experiences and domination, as well as biases towards them. In her call to "decolonize" research on norms, Charlotte Epstein (2017) underscores the (asymmetrical, global) power relations inherent in norm-making, or norming and "re-norming", including in non-Western states and societies. Constructivism, she notes, is "grounded" in liberalism and its assumptions. The result, for her, is that scholarship on norms often implicitly or explicitly justifies racist, colonial exploitative practices. This necessitates an expansion not just of the empirical terrain covered, but also of the presuppositions undergirding scholarship on norms. She thus adds a focus on (local) experience to counteract the "universalizing" impulses deduced from "abstract reason" inherent in liberalism. However, an alternative universalisation is not the goal of research (8-10). Like its liberal counterpart or any other viewpoint, "the postcolonial perspective [...] is necessarily a partial perspective" (11). Even studies of "norm contestation" or the ways in which "actors [...] dispute the validity, the meaning or the application of norms" often have an inherently systemic, liberal bias (Wolff and Zimmerman 2016, 518).

Together with the constructivist tendency to examine "good norms" (Epstein 2017), this can leave us in the dark with respect to changes in established dynamics of norm-making and un-making. The latter are no less important even if they do not receive the kind of emphasis put on human rights and democracy-related norms.¹ Further post-colonial scholarship on norms beckons. It need not *discard* conventional (liberal, or even realist) paradigms. Serious exploration of non-Western world politics will often reveal

¹This is not to say that democratic norms are not relevant to the GCC, as Sadiki's piece (2020) in this Special Issue argues. They are noted for their absence academically (not addressed head-on) and empirically (not practised by GCC states with the qualified exception of Kuwait).

how intertwined Western and non-Western experiences, ideas and practices are, less “different” than often assumed (Bilgin 2008).

An effort to engage the putative universality of some norms derived from the Westphalian understanding of international politics, even while accounting for (post-colonial) specificity, is thus our departure point for investigating norms and normlessness in the Gulf. The norms that are often assumed to be more or less universal set out a prescriptive position, not just an empirical observation. As such, these are tied to the identity of the state. The norm of sovereignty is deemed foundational. Consequently, so is non-intervention. Following this view, it is *intervention* (for example, the KSA-led war against the Houthis in Yemen) rather than non-intervention that often garners attempts at policy and scholarly explanation, not the reverse.

Yet, basic norms that are taken for granted as pertaining to all states and societies interact with those that may be specific to particular (sub)regions: particular Arab or Gulf states and their identities. This is where anti-Zionism and support for the Palestinian cause come in, as does the (increasingly less explicit) aspiration towards some semblance of Gulf or Arab unity. However, Ewan Stein (2012) sounds a note of caution. He is sceptical of interpretations of the Middle East as a region unique in the primacy of ideas and identities, and thereby better suited than Europe, for instance, to constructivist analysis. This assumption reeks of Orientalism, he says. Undergirding these positions is an under-appreciation or under-exploration of the complex relations between state and society in the Middle East, which are not necessarily in accordance with the Western model. Stein critiques arguments that ideologies (for example, pan-Arabism) are more salient in the Middle East than in other regions due to an underlying problem with ‘stateness’ itself in the Middle East. Instead, transnational ideologies and identities (such as leftists or the Muslim Brotherhood) exist *parallel* to sovereignty, which has never been in question as a declared ideal. Sociological, contextualised case-by-case analyses of identities and ideologies (sub- and supranational) can reveal how they are enmeshed in or contest norms – and thus behaviour – associated with or vis-à-vis the state (902). In fact, Raffaella Del Sarto *et al.* (2019) argue that “specific battles over the meanings of” region-wide norms such as the (il)legitimacy of Israel, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism and stances towards unending external intervention in the region are recurring in postcolonial MENA experiences (9). In other words, the *contestability* of norms appears to be characteristic of the MENA order. As a result, what may require exploration is not the patterning of uniformly “appropriate” behaviour in light of given identities, but the various and changing discourses involved. This may be an important specificity of the region and the GCC subregion, as normlessness reflects and fails to regulate the spike in interventionist behaviour. Here, then, is an approach to investigating the (sub)region’s many conflicts.

In this Special Issue, the guiding question is where to situate the GCC within debates about identities and norms in the MENA region. Attention to norms, theoretical and empirical, can help explicate the discordant politics of the subregion, particularly since 2011. By doing so, we seek to go beyond Stephen D. Krasner’s (1999) well known and well worn “organized hypocrisy” to explain perennial violations of sovereignty, as he somehow sidesteps deep-rooted international hierarchies and power asymmetries in discussions of “invitations” to violate sovereignty through contracts, for instance. We seek, furthermore, to try to understand the interplay between the “logic of appropriateness”

and the “logic of consequences”, rather than separating them as Krasner seems to do. In our view, one is not suspended in favour of the other. Power is always at play – between the West and the Gulf, between the GCC states and other MENA countries, and within the GCC itself.

Other influential, Eurocentric paradigms seem to deny the empirics of persistent intervention in Third World “quasi states”, as Robert Jackson calls them. He attributes supposed “negative sovereignty” (freedom from intervention) to decolonised states, while absolving Western-led economic and global governance systems from “substantive” inadequacies in non-Western state sovereignty (Jackson 1991). Critics posit that the resulting “sovereignty dilemma” ignores the global capitalist division of labour and the resultant unequal distribution of wealth, compromising the conditions of sovereignty itself (Inayatullah 1996). Following this, GCC states’ role in petrodollar recycling (see Saleh 2020) may work against modern conceptualisations and attendant norms of state sovereignty.

Further problematising sovereignty, Sara Phillips, through a comparison of Western and Yemeni discourses about Al-Qaeda, suggests that what may be the foundational “norm” in IR, that is, state monopolisation of violence, comes undone in the Yemeni state. At least in popular perceptions, state elites instrumentally manipulate non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda – who challenge their very monopoly over coercion – against opponents, or engage them in pursuit of international legitimacy and the benefits it may offer. Non-state and state actors may not be so different, after all, says Phillips (2017, 140). This leads her to conclude that “th[e] purportedly universal norm” of state legitimacy underwritten by its monopoly over violence “was never universal to begin with” (138).

Such fine-grained analyses raise important questions about the universality of core norms in international relations (practice and theory). If as fundamental a norm as sovereignty (inside and outside the region) is open to question, theoretical deconstruction and empirical investigation, then other norms concerning integration or alliances, for instance, are equally deserving of careful explanation in the GCC. At the level of both identity and behaviour – which are linked by norms, as constructivism asserts and liberalism perhaps affirms – a rethinking of Arab politics must start from the very beginning. In the Middle East and the Gulf subregion, adopting norms as a lens, as this Special Issue seeks to do, can help political scientists and IR scholars unpack which rules are invoked and the extent to which they are operative. Often, this also means attention to dynamics within the state *and* society. As Fred Halliday (2005) has stressed, domestic and international politics are inextricably intertwined in the Middle East in particular, given that a “common external context” gives rise to shared experiences and perhaps even “common concerns” (38–9). It remains the purview of theoretically informed, empirical studies to map out where these common concerns end, in this case within the GCC, and less common ones begin. The 2017 blockade/crisis is, again, a case in point.

Identifying normlessness

The study of norms is notoriously challenging for scholars, from definition to identification and measurement to assessments of causality (Bjorkdahl 2002). Additional considerations present themselves in this Special Issue. In exploring norms related to the

international politics of the GCC, it is important to bear in mind that it is a subregion of the Middle East and North Africa. Norms therefore have to be investigated at various interlocking levels: subregional and regional conduct both intersect with global conduct.

Ian Lustick (1997) offers a different approach to international norms, including state territorial sovereignty. He critiques the dual logic of international norms, namely state-building and sovereignty norms. In the Middle East, he argues, state-building, like war-making, has been prevented by Western powers as a norm (within-a-norm, perhaps) to 'block' the rise of a regional hegemon, from Egypt's Muhammad Ali to Iraq's Saddam Hussein. The active exclusion of Arab states from global circles of power has included a Western interest in "preserving petrodollar monarchies and sheikdoms in the Gulf whose very survival" has necessitated "the most favorable and intimate of relationships with the Western powers" (674). Thus, Western intervention has actually worked *against* projects of Arab unity and regional integration. Instead of endless critiques of Arab (including Gulf) elites *flouting* international norms of sovereignty, non-intervention, alliance-making, popular sovereignty and democratic regionalism, it may be that the liberal international order itself facilitates the undermining of Arab compliance with those norms.

Yet only simplistic and irresponsible scholarship would explain the normlessness we propose here, embodied in the GCC crisis, as merely an outcome of Western dominance in the international political order. Arab elites (and publics), too, possess agency, even when constrained (or reinforced) by international material and ideational structures. The upshot, as this Introduction suggests, is to investigate normlessness according to the GCC's own terms. We argue that GCC states have not complied with the norms they laid down for themselves. "Triangulation" of founding documents and official declarations and case study analysis (as in most of the articles in this Special Issue) is one way to attempt the measurement of norms (and norm compliance or violation), as Gregory Raymond (1997, 222) suggests. If the UN Charter is seen as the "global covenant", essentially a "doctrine of recognition and non-intervention that bridges different civilizations and cultures around the world" (Jackson 2000, 13), then what are the norms outlined in the 'regional covenant' of the GCC?

The GCC Charter (1981) declares a collective intention to work towards "coordination, cooperation, and integration" between the six member states. These states and their societies all belong to the "Arab Nation" and share the "creed of Islam". In fact, the Charter even gives a passing nod to Gulf societies, noting that the GCC will work on "all essential areas that concern their [member states'] peoples" (Ibid.). The 1999 Riyadh Declaration reinforces this norm. It "reiterates that the GCC, in reality, is nothing but an embodiment of Arab fraternity and Islamic solidarity". It has always been part of the "large Arab environment" as well as "the Islamic nation" (*ummah*). Potential GCC unity would in turn strengthen Arabs and the "dignity of the Islamic world" (Supreme Council 1999).² Therefore, Arab and Islamic solidarity are delineated as what might be called a "constitutive norm", one that "socially constructs the identities, interests, and practices" of policy makers (Adler 1997, 344). The Gulf states and their societies are Arab, and also Muslim. This multi-layered identity presumably has bearing on policy.

²Please note that there are some discrepancies between the Arabic and English versions of the document. We are keeping all the quotes from the translated English version here.

In terms more familiar to IR examinations of norms, another GCC document asserts that political and diplomatic decisions are guided by “neighborly principles, non-intervention in internal affairs, respect of sovereignty of each state over its territories and resources, and the peaceful settlement of disputes” (GCC Secretariat-General 2014, 13). The subregional organisation thus establishes norms of non-intervention bolstered by neighbourliness, sovereignty and peaceful conflict resolution. Yet the Charter (and subsequent declarations) are vague and aspirational with respect to integration. While a step in the right direction, they are neither prescriptive (providing clear guidelines on norms of solidarity and non-intervention) nor proscriptive (articulating what would be considered breaches, and resultant consequences).

In this very brief exercise, we have sought to sidestep predominant Eurocentric, Westphalian statism and its bundle of norms often un-thoughtfully transplanted in analysis (and policy) from the West to the rest. Instead, we suggest that GCC normlessness can be gauged convincingly only through analysis of the discourses and practices of GCC elites on their own terms. No doubt these are coloured by the dominant discourses of the liberal global covenant as Jackson would have it, or a (hegemonic) post-globalisation order as Robert W. Cox more critically puts it (1996). Yet from Islamic to Arab to Gulf political and social solidarity to non-intervention and sovereignty, the international politics of the Gulf all seems to indicate norm violation to the point of normlessness.

The foundational norm of non-intervention derived from state sovereignty is continually ignored. Non-compliance with other norms including democratic regionalism (Sadiki 2020), alliance-making (Saleh 2020; Başkan and Pala 2020; Bianco 2020) and conflict mediation (Milton-Edwards 2020; Fraihat 2020) follow suit. Measured against a Charter and declarations that speak to their internal history, bonds, tribal solidarity and Islamic membership, the GCC states repeatedly appear to disregard their own norms. This created discord, even years before the blockade/crisis (Berger 2014).

Theoretical and empirical implications abound. Such normlessness is detrimental not only to the subregion. It works against rising GCC states being good global citizens. It generates risks to peacemaking, creating problems for national sovereignty outside GCC territory, from Libya to Yemen and beyond. This is not a case of regional “hypocrisy” in norms, where interests are privileged over moral guidelines but always via *justifications*, as Krasner argues (1999). Rather, these core norms appear to have been done away with altogether, not least in the blockade/crisis and other Gulf MENA interventions mentioned above.

Exploring normlessness in this Special Issue

This Special Issue critically assesses regional IR within the context of the Gulf subregion. Specifically, it aims to address anomalies in previously theorised or assumed state behaviour – what we term normlessness – as the (sub)region plunges into the practice of coercive intervention. Unfettered disregard and violation of norms, or normlessness, serves as the unifying theoretical framework for the articles in this Special Issue. Thus, Larbi Sadiki links the dearth of democratic norm-making at the domestic level to regional dysfunction in the GCC and its institutions. The missing link, repeatedly overlooked in analyses and commentary on the current Gulf blockade/crisis, is the absence of popular sovereignty, an argument he makes through a radical re-reading of Jürgen Habermas and

John Rawls to emphasise the ‘glue’ that democratic norm-making can constitute in regional community-building. The same ills at the level of national Gulf political (mis)management (centralised, non-institutionalised decision-making by authoritarian monarchs and the sidelining of popular participation) spill over into the regional organisation that is the GCC, crisis-riddled since its very inception.

Beverley Milton-Edwards investigates the ways in which the Gulf blockade/crisis has exposed the limitations of reigning models of conflict resolution and mediation as theory and (normative) practice fail to close the intra-GCC rift. Critically interrogating the terms and trajectory of the US-Saudi alliance, Layla Saleh suggests that long-entrenched structural hierarchies and dependency characterise relations between the two countries in a manner that flouts alliance-making and alliance-keeping norms. Birol Başkan and Özgür Pala trace the roots of the Turkish-Qatari alliance, shedding light on Turkey’s pro-Qatar stance in the 2017 blockade/crisis. Ibrahim Fraihat compares superpower (US) and small-state (Kuwait) mediation, arguing that the latter has proven more effective in ongoing third-party efforts to facilitate a resolution to the crisis. Cinzia Bianco compares threat perceptions and alliance/counter-alliances by the Gulf states vis-à-vis Iran, noting divergences in the use of hard and soft power (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE) on the one hand, and hedging (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar) on the other.

Read on their own and collectively, the articles all point to some perspective on normlessness and the failure of existing (or non-existing) norms in the GCC, hence, normlessness. From the pre-independence rumblings of popular protest politics cast aside in the GCC to elite-driven negotiations blocked from public scrutiny, Sadiki illustrates that democratic regionalism as a norm may be the missing piece to unlocking the perpetual GCC crisis puzzle. Milton-Edwards highlights failures in existing norms (or an ambiguous diplomatic repertoire) of conflict resolution as various actors scrambled to help resolve the blockade/crisis, to no avail. Fraihat suggests that small-state mediation, unhindered by the interests of superpowers, may offer greater ‘local’ credibility – and yet the blockade/crisis remains in effect at the time of writing. This may indicate the political-diplomatic (and economic and social) costs of the weak or absent conflict mediation norms characteristic of international society. The Qatari-Turkish alliance Başkan and Pala examine may be path-dependent with alliance norms of (relative) reciprocity, but even this has not helped resolve the blockade/crisis. And shifting alliance politics may sidestep normative considerations altogether through more and more frequent use of force, feeding into violations of the norm of non-intervention inside and outside the Gulf.

At the same time, intra-Gulf normlessness is situated within skewed dynamics of dependency between the GCC and the US, which violate the (absent) norms of alliance-making, even viewed from classical realist perspectives, as Saleh argues. Curiously, this may almost be a “negative norm” uniting all GCC states, even as they are at odds. It spills over into the Gulf subregional free-for-all. Particularly given the 2003 Iraq precedent, is the threat (and historical socio-political-cultural residue) of great power (US) intervention the deterrent discouraging outright war in the GCC, even if it does not constrain forms of intervention bordering on normlessness?

A future research agenda

This Special Issue only scratches the surface of bringing norms into the politics of the Gulf, and bringing the Gulf into the disciplines of Political Science and IR. Research on Gulf politics tends to be weak on theory, leaning towards more descriptive, policy- and security-focused analyses. Matteo Legrenzi (2015) is one of the few scholars who recently braved the waters of explicit theorising about Gulf politics, seeking to explain “hybrid” GCC regionalism to account for the role of identity in alliances. Yet perhaps more than “coup-proofing” (Ibid., Ch. 3) is at work in GCC relations with the US, as Saleh suggests in this Special Issue. There is ample room for innovative theorising and empirical analysis strengthened by clearer conceptual foundations.

One possible direction might be incorporating Islamic conceptualisations of IR theory to examine the Gulf blockade/crisis, as well as the subregion’s new wave of interventionism. The absence here is one limitation of this Special Issue, but constitutes an avenue for further research. For decades, scholars have posed questions about Islamic IR as *practice* (either in elite behaviour or cultural attitudes of the masses) and/or as a framework for *analysis*, in a context in which concerns about law on the one hand, and “the unity of the *ummah*” on the other have historically prevailed (Hourani 1966, 116).

As discussed above, GCC discourse continues to feature references to a wider Islamic community, even as war-making and dictatorial practices raise questions about adherence to Islamic norms. This disjuncture calls for investigation. The ways in which Islamic worldviews with their alternative ontologies play into the motivations and behaviours of political actors deserve more serious attention than generally allotted it in IR theory (Turner 2015). Insights from Islamic legal theory and noted Muslim thinkers (such as sociologist Ibn Khaldun) make it possible to reconceptualise statehood, the structure of international politics, relations between Muslim states and the Western world, and interpretations of these global dynamics by Muslim elites and publics (Sabet 2003).

Underscoring the centrality of norms (proscriptive, regulative or constraining) for outlining Islamic conceptions of international relations, Mohammed Khan (1997) has argued that Islam can be considered an “ethical tradition”. Traditional Islamic thought may have viewed the world order in realist terms, but this was always restrained by the ethical imperative underlying the conception of politics itself in Islam (186). This ethical tradition has generally been deontological (recall Raymond’s (1997) “deontic” norms above), with a more recent turn towards “utilitarian” ethics (Khan 1997, 185) underlain by a Machiavellian sort of logic.

The added value of integrating Islamic precepts into the international politics of the Gulf feeds into future research on norms and other topics, opening another window for the decolonising trajectory (Jones 2006; Hobson 2012). Attempting to bridge Islamic and Western theories, Robert Cox (1996) examines Ibn Khaldun as a gateway to intercivilisational “empathy” and a potential “posthegemonic” order (characterised by a plurality of value systems) in which “mutual recognition” facilitates conflict resolution, possibly reducing violence (152-3). Thus Cox attempts a Western IR reading of Ibn Khaldun’s theories of world order (decline and sufficient conditions for revival), the “intersubjectivity” of *asabiyyah* (group-feeling or solidarity) at the core of state-making (building) and un-making, Islam’s unity dispersed in various power centres across the globe, still held together however weakly by notions of the *ummah*, etc. How these typically

Islamic concepts are variously and dynamically expressed in the GCC and other Muslim contexts in today's neoliberal capitalist world order could be a promising direction for future study of the Gulf and MENA.

Norms are also important for research. Ibn Khaldun, broken down into his scholarly output ("text") and his personal/professional "life", further illustrates how normative ideas (religious beliefs distinguishing right from wrong) can coexist, not uneasily, with rigorous scholarly praxis and knowledge production (Cox 1996, 167). This speaks to the reflexivity Sadiki (2020) alludes to, relevant to any critical analysis deconstructing material and discursive structures (Saleh 2020) in regional and international politics.

These are just hints of the potential of approaching IR from a range of Islamic perspectives in MENA, generally, and the GCC, specifically, where references to Islam feature consistently in public statements and declarations (including the GCC charter). The KSA's leader himself is named *Khadim al-Haramayn* (Servant of the Two Holy Sites). Hence, the possible value of using Islamic concepts in localised, context-specific IR theory and analysis is not far-fetched. This holds true even when elites and states appear to behave in realist terms, seemingly unrestrained in a milieu of normlessness, as this Special Issue suggests. Islamic discourse imbues state and society, in the Gulf as in the Arab world at large, albeit in ways that are changing in a transforming region. This is not a new observation. What would be new is to marshal this (dynamic) empirical reality in conceptual and theoretical endeavours studying the international politics of the GCC and the MENA region.

Another trajectory for future research is the affective or emotional dimension of Gulf politics. Arguably, it can enable us, in constructivist fashion, to go beyond structuralist analyses or assessments of simply material capabilities. For instance, the trauma inflicted (at individual, societal and state levels) by the blockade/crisis comes to mind. Emma Hutchison (2016) has stressed that emotions give meaning to lived experience (17). They are thus of relevance to international politics, tied up in power, "shaped by dominant [...] discourses", but also provide opportunities for alternative identitarian conceptualisations and emerging national or transnational solidarities (19). Hostility, solidarity, outrage, empathy, etc. are all emotions that are possibly at play in the reactions and representations of the Gulf crisis, as political discourse affects elite behaviour and vice versa.

Conclusion

One objective of the articles in this Special Issue is to avoid essentialist (Orientalist) assumptions about the Middle East or the Gulf or any other set of states and their societies. The constantly shifting state of play in the GCC must be subject to empirical scrutiny. Such investigation may be illuminated by IR theory (or, perhaps a rethinking/re-reading/recasting of it), in this case as it relates to norms. Seeking to explore presumably universal tendencies and behaviours by international actors is no small feat. The processes and institutions through which actors pursue conflict or cooperation, the full gamut of interactions between the two and the identitarian repertoires and discourses they bring to their dealings with one another are all constructs, made and remade within specific contexts in need of historicisation and disaggregation.

At the same time, the Special Issue's authors drive home another point. The prevailing intra-GCC order cannot be insulated from either local or global Realpolitik. At the current historical juncture, the six Gulf states seem to be mired in mismatches between one state's perception of the others' attitudes and actions, and tendencies towards non-compliance with putative (local and international) norms governing collective political behaviour. Attempting to unpack this sobering Gulf scene, the Special Issue offers a forum for timely, lively and provocative arguments and investigations. Our interest is not just theoretically and empirically, but also normatively driven, since normlessness, as we suggest, places regional as well as international stability at risk. As such, it warrants further investigation by scholars of Gulf and MENA politics and international relations.

Notes on contributors

Larbi Sadiki is Professor of Arab Democratization in the Department of International Affairs, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar.

Layla Saleh is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Department of International Affairs, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. Email: layla.saleh@qu.edu.qa

References

- Adler, E. 1997. Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics. *European Journal of International Relations* 3 (3): 319–63.
- Baabood, A. 2003. Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU. *Review of International Affairs* 3 (2): 254–82.
- Barkin, J. S. 2003. Realist Constructivism. *International Studies Review* 5 (3): 325–42.
- Barnett, M., and Gause, G. 1998. Caravans in Opposite Directions: Society, State and the Development of a Community in the Gulf Cooperation Council. In E. Adler and M. Barnett, eds. *Security Communities*: 161–97. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Başkan, B., and Pala, Ö. 2020. Making Sense of Turkey's Reaction to the Qatar Crisis. *The International Spectator* 55 (2): 65–78.
- Berger, L. 2014. The Gulf Cooperation Council between Unity and Discord Towards the Arab Uprisings. *Sicherheit und Frieden (S+F)/Security and Peace* 32 (4): 260–4.
- Bianco, C. 2020. The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics. *The International Spectator* 55 (2): 92–107.
- Bilgin, P. 2008. Thinking past 'Western' IR? *Third World Quarterly* 29 (1): 5–23.
- Bjorkdahl, A. 2002. Norms in International Relations: Some Conceptual and Methodological Reflections. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15 (1): 9–23.
- Cooley, A. 2015. Countering Democratic Norms. *Journal of Democracy* 26 (3): 56–60.
- Cox, R. W. 1996. Towards a Posthegemonic Conceptualization of World Order: Reflections on the Relevance of Ibn Khaldun. In R. W. Cox, with T. J. Sinclair. *Approaches to World Order*: 144–73. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deitelhoff, N., and Zimmerman, L. 2019. Norms Under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Norm Robustness. *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4 (1): 2–17.
- Del Sarto, R. A., Malmvig, H., and Soler i Lecha, E. 2019. Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011. *MENARA Final Reports* 1, February. http://menaraproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/menara_fr_1-1.pdf.
- Diapola, A. 2020. Middle East's \$2 Trillion Wealth Gone by 2034, IMF Says. *Bloomberg*, 6 February. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-06/middle-east-s-2-trillion-wealth-could-be-gone-by-2034-imf-says>.

- Ehteshami, A. 2015. GCC Foreign Policy: From the Iran-Iraq War to the Arab Awakening. The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States. *LSE Middle East Center, Collected Papers* 1: 14. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/61772/1/The%20new%20politics%20of%20intervention%20of%20Gulf%20Arab%20states.pdf>.
- Epstein, C. 2017. The Postcolonial Perspective: Why We Need to Decolonize Norms. In C. Epstein, ed. *Against International Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives*: 1–22. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fawcett, L. 2017. State and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities. *International Affairs* 93 (4): 789–807.
- Finnemore, M., and Sikkink, K. 1998. International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization* 52 (4): 887–917.
- Fraihat, I. 2020. Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis. *The International Spectator* 55 (2): 79–91.
- GCC Secretariat-General. 2014. GCC: The Process and Achievements. 8th edn. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/CognitiveSources/DigitalLibrary/Lists/DigitalLibrary/The%20GCC%20Process%20and%20achievement/7161447306380.pdf>.
- Gulf Cooperation Council. 1981. The Charter. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/Pages/Primarylaw.aspx>.
- Halliday, F. 2005. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinnebusch, R., and Ehteshami, A. 2016. Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism. In L. Fawcett, ed. *International Relations of the Middle East*: 231–58. 4th edn. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hobson, J. M. 2012. *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hourani, A. 1966. Review: Islam and International Relations, by J. Harris Proctor. *Middle East Journal* 20 (1): 114–6.
- Hutchison, E. 2016. *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Inayatullah, N. 1996. Beyond the Sovereignty Dilemma: Quasi-States as Social Construct. In T. Biersteker and C. Weber, eds. *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*: 50–80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, R. 2000. *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, R. H. 1991. *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, B. G., ed. 2006. *Decolonizing International Relations*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kant, I. 1795. *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*. Trans. M. Campbell Smith. London: George Allen and Unwin; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903.
- Khan, Mohammed A. M. 1997. Islam as an Ethical Tradition of International Relations. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8(2): 177–92.
- Klotz, A. 1999. *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Krasner, S. D. 1999. *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Legrenzi, M. 2015. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security, and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Lustick, I. S. 1997. The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political ‘Backwardness’ in Historical Perspective. *International Organization* 51 (4): 653–83.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. 1994-1995. The False Promise of International Institutions. *International Security* 19 (3): 5–49.
- Mill, J. S. 1859. A Few Words on Non-Intervention. Reprint. *Foreign Policy Perspectives* 8. <http://www.libertarian.co.uk/lapubs/forep/forep008.pdf>.
- Milton-Edwards, B. 2020. The Blockade on Qatar: Conflict Management Failings. *The International Spectator* 55 (2): 34–48.
- Nye, J. S. Jr. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

- Onuf, N. 1987. *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*. Greenwood, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Phillips, S. 2017. The Norm of State-Monopolised Violence from a Yemeni Perspective. In C. Epstein, ed. *Against International Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives*: 138–57. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Raymond, G. A. 1997. Problems and Prospects in the Study of International Norms. *Mershon International Studies Review* 41 (2): 205–45.
- Ryan, C. R. 2015. Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East. *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East. POMEPS Studies* 16: 42–6. http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/POMEPS_Studies_16_IR_Web1.pdf.
- Sabet, A. G. E. 2003. The Islamic Paradigm of Nations: Toward a Neoclassical Approach. *Religion, State and Society* 31 (2): 179–202.
- Sadiki, L. 2015. The Impact of the Arab Spring on the Gulf Cooperation Council. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17 (3): 303–20.
- Sadiki, L. 2016. The Arab Spring: ‘The People’ in International Relations. In L. Fawcett, ed. *International Relations of the Middle East*: 324–55. 4th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sadiki, L. 2020. Regionalism in Crisis: GCC Integration without Democracy. *The International Spectator* 55 (2): 17–33.
- Saleh, L. 2020. GCC-US Alliance-Making Reconsidered: The Travails of Dependency. *The International Spectator* 55 (2): 49–64.
- Stein, E. 2012. Beyond Arabism vs. Sovereignty: Relocating Ideas in the International Relations of the Middle East. *Review of International Studies* 38 (4): 881–905.
- Supreme Council. 1999. The Closing Statement of the Twentieth Session. *Gulf Cooperation Council*. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/Statements/SupremeCouncil/Pages/TwentiethSession.aspx>.
- Telhami, S. Z., and Barnett, M., eds. 2002. *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, John A. 2015. *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and the International Order*. London: Palgrave.
- Ulrichsen, K. C. 2015. *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wendt, A. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolff, J., and Zimmerman, L. 2016. Between Banyans and Battle Scenes: Liberal Norms, Contestation and the Limits of Critique. *Review of International Studies* 42 (3): 513–34.
- Young, K. E. 2013. The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC. *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 02, December. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/18581929.pdf>.