

# The Impact of Different Basic Trust Types During Critical Situations: The Case of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

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## ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the impact of ontological security on states' foreign policy preferences. The study posits that foreign policy preferences are closely related with their basic trust, a product of the intricate interplay between actor's agentic capacity and its internal and external environment. This theoretical proposition is subsequently subjected to comparative examination within the contexts of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The study contends that despite sharing similar concerns regarding physical and ontological security, these two actors have pursued distinct foreign policy trajectories regarding the Arab uprisings and normalization with Israel that owe to differing types of basic trust. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the ontological security literature from two perspectives: 1) to refine and elucidate the scope of the basic trust concept by reinterpreting it and highlighting its central role in ontological security analysis, and 2) to contribute to the practical applications of the field by applying the concepts developed in the ontological security literature to case studies of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

**Keywords:** Ontological Security, Foreign Policy, Middle East, Arab Uprisings, Normalization with Israel

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## Introduction

The so-called Arab uprisings, which led to the upheaval and, in some cases, termination of regimes that had persisted in the Middle East for decades, resulted in significant changes in regional power dynamics. The instability created in the region by the wars initiated by the United States (US) in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of its war-on-terror strategy was deepened by the internal conflicts in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya during the Arab uprisings. The reduction of the US military presence in the region, previously perceived as a significant stabilizing factor, has exacerbated the power vacuum. This situation has, on one hand, allowed Iran to increase its influence, as seen in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and on the other hand, facilitated the empowerment of non-state actors, as observed in examples like the Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The US policy of “normalization with Israel”, aimed at restoring a favorable balance of power, has further complicated the situation. Taken altogether, this and the other regional developments mentioned above have necessitated a reassessment of threat perceptions and regional policies by regional actors, notably Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which harbor concerns regarding both Iran and the Ikhwan. Notably, Saudi Arabia has revisited its existing policies, granting primacy to the Ikhwan as a threat during the Arab uprisings starting in 2011 and adopting a measured stance towards normalization with Israel, which intensified after 2020 with the Abraham Accords signed between Israel and some Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. Conversely, Kuwait has maintained its prevailing policies without making any alterations in response to these circumstances.

Notwithstanding the comparable concerns shared by these respective states, their divergent responses offer a point of study. If conventional approaches in international relations were accurate and if physical security were the exclusive determinant, one would anticipate these states to display similar patterns in their foreign policy behaviors. Additionally, one might expect Kuwait to exhibit greater willingness to bandwagon with Saudi Arabia against the rise of Iran and the threats posed by the Ikhwan during the Arab uprisings and to reach accommodation with Israel due to its heightened reliance on the US for its security.

It is certainly possible to elucidate the policies pursued by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during the Arab uprisings and the normalization process with Israel through a realist perspective. The realist literature attempting to explain the foreign policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states predominantly focuses on changes occurring around actors, asserting that Gulf countries operate with a reflex of regime security under evolving environmental conditions (Gause III 2013; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 2013). However, this explanation does not answer why Kuwait turned away from both a global power like the US and influential regional powers such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, certain studies within liberal theory aim to analyze the foreign policies of GCC states within the context of power and interest dynamics in their domestic social and political structures (Brichs, and Lampridi-Kemou 2013; Bank, Richter and Sunik 2014). Yet this kind of explanation would necessitate defining Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as isolated actors, disregarding their relationships with their external environment. Fundamentally, these traditional approaches seek to correlate states’ foreign policy decisions with the imperative of state survival. There is no reason to object to this proposition, but traditional approaches assume that the imperative of the state’s survival compels the development of behavioral patterns solely focused on physical security (Rumelili and Adisönmez 2020: 26). Actors, in addition to the concern for survival, also consider the manner in which they exist. Consequently, actors exhibit behaviors that are oriented towards preserving the continuity and integrity of the selves they construct (Mitzen and Larson 2017: 5).

Proceeding from this point, this study will be grounded on the argument that states not only focus on their physical security but also operate based on their ontological security, which has recently been developed by a number of studies (Mitzen 2006a; Kinnvall 2007; Darwich 2016; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Steele 2008; Rumelili 2015; Zarakol 2010). Based on this argument, the study will assert that (1) the pursuit of ontological security heavily depends upon actors’ basic trust, which is “the main emotional support of a protective cocoon”

(Giddens 2006: 41) and, (2) that basic trust types cause the differentiation of states' foreign policy behaviors. We follow Mitzen's (2006a) distinction on the nature of an actor's basic trust (healthy or maladaptive). Nevertheless, we posit that Mitzen's conceptualization of basic trust, primarily rooted in the attributes of routines involving significant actors, ought to be broadened to encompass the capacities of the state. Thus, by incorporating insights from Steele (2008), we have expanded Mitzen's definition to include "agentic capacity", acknowledging the impact of both "internal" and "external environments" on the formulation of actors' basic trust. Therefore, we posit that the puzzle of why Saudi Arabia and Kuwait pursue different policies can be elucidated with the fact that these actors have different basic trust types. This study will contribute to the ontological security literature in the international relations from two perspectives. Firstly, it aims to refine and elucidate the scope of the basic trust concept by reinterpreting it and highlighting its central role in ontological security analysis. Secondly, it seeks to contribute to the practical applications of the field by applying the developed concepts in the ontological security literature to case studies of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The research commences with a theoretical section that discusses the determinants that shape the foundation of basic trust. Drawing on that theoretical framework, we analyze the ontological security perspectives of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In the subsequent sections of the study, the theoretical arguments developed have been assessed within the context of the two actors' involvement in the Arab uprisings and normalization with Israel.

## **Ontological Security as a Motivator of Social Behavior**

Individuals who were "thrown into" a world with infinite threats (Browning and Joenniemi 2016: 16) must have "tacit acceptance of the categories of duration and extension, together with the identity of objects, other persons and the self" (Giddens 2006: 38) to take even the simplest actions in their daily life. For Giddens (2006: 244), the individual's ability to establish a healthy relationship with such a world depends on a strong sense of ontological security, which is the "sense of continuity and order" in the self and one's environment. By reflexively monitoring all potential threats of the world, the individual creates a "universe of actual and possible events surrounding the individual's current activities and projects for the future" (Giddens 2006: 130) via a "protective cocoon". The individual maintains her relations with the outside world through this cocoon and reproduces it throughout one's life with one's behaviors. According to Giddens (2006: 39-41), the crucial factor in the formation of the protective cocoon is the sense of basic trust developed as formed by the individual's early interactions with the caregiver. The quality of the relationship between the infant and caregiver directly affects the quality of the protective cocoon that the individual will produce in the future. Thus, the actor, through the assistance of one's basic trust, formulates a protective cocoon, by which one acquires a sense of ontological security that ensures the continuity of both one's "self" and environment. Within a life based on routines, where the individual's perception of the continuity of oneself and the surroundings remains uninterrupted, ontological security is not questioned by actors. The relationship between ontological security and behavior becomes particularly apparent during periods of instability, which are an inherent part of life, characterized by new threats, crises, and changes that disrupt established routines. Actors may experience ontological insecurity

in “critical situations” that cause them to reflect on fundamental existential questions, such as “existence, finitude, relations and autobiography” (Ejdus 2018: 2).

The ontological security literature in International Relations employs Giddens’ arguments, establishing an analogy between individuals and states to elucidate state behavior. Despite the inherent limitations of such analogies made between individuals and social structures, states, akin to individuals, require a sense of ontological security to engage with other actors in the international arena, given the diverse concerns they must contend with. Similar to individuals, states seek to establish ontological security through a protective cocoon that shields against external threats. States may also encounter ontological insecurity when they lose trust in the continuity of their external environment, feel anxious about death due to powerful threats, encounter disruptions in their relationships with significant others, or encounter challenges to the continuity of their self-identity (Ejdus 2018: 2). These critical situations may surpass the capabilities of actors’ “protective cocoon”, causing increased anxiety and disrupting their established routines, thereby weakening their sense of biographical continuity. In such circumstances, actors have two options: to restructure their existing cocoon by generating novel answers to existential questions or to completely renew it with alternative possibilities (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 246-7). However, the ability of actors to adapt is crucial, as not everyone can keep up with the changing circumstances. For Mitzen (2006a: 350-351) there are two broad categories of actors: (a) the ones with a “healthy basic trust”, who can tolerate the uncertainty caused by disruptions since they trust that routines will be re-established, and (b) the ones with a “maladaptive basic trust,” who view routines as ends and adhere strictly to them under all circumstances.

Mitzen’s distinction brings forward the question of why states have different level of basic trust in the first place. As mentioned above, Giddens finds the answer in the early relation between infant and caregiver. Since it is impossible to find a similar relation in the domain of international relations, Mitzen (2006b: 275) points to “the character and location of routines” by arguing that “where agency is anchored by routines that permit reflection and critical distance from participation, and where these routines can be performed in a stable environment or ‘home’, actors have healthy basic trust”. So, Mitzen focuses on the qualities of routines in the foundation of actors’ basic trust, but she ignores the impact of actors’ ability on this process, which should be equally important in constructing basic trust types (Krolikowski 2008: 114-115). While Mitzen (2006b: 274) acknowledges this point, she neglects the role of “agentic capacity” as an “intuitive” factor.

A critique of this assertion has been articulated by Steele. Despite the fact that he did not question the role of basic trust, he offers a challenge to Mitzen’s perspective on the overall construction of ontological security by emphasizing the significance of actors’ abilities. Steele criticizes Mitzen for overemphasizing the role of the environment, while neglecting the role of actors in the process of ontological security construction. Steele (2008: 34) contends that “the identities of states emerge from their own project of the self.” In this regard, actors develop a sense of ontological security by crafting a biographical narrative that accounts for their actions and reflexively adapting it to changing circumstances. Steele posits that the essential distinction between actors is not in the “flexibility of routines,” but rather in the “flexibility

of subjectivity,” that is, the ability of an actor to transform its “Self” when confronted with a critical situation (Steele 2008: 60-62). In Steele’s view, a healthy actor maintains a distance from its biographical narrative or identity, enabling it to readily modify it when necessary. The position emphasizing the significance of actors’ characteristics in the formation of the ontological security, as articulated by Steele, is supported by various scholars within the realm of ontological security studies (Ejdus 2022: Kayhan Pusane and Ilgit 2022). Nevertheless, while highlighting the role of agentic capacity in the construction of ontological security, this position reifies actors’ self-identities by suggesting that they can shape their self-projects as they desire without considering what is happening in the external world.

Even though both approaches have made a valuable contribution to the ontological security literature in International Relations, a broader approach which would integrate both agentic capacity and the role of environment in the construction of the ontological security would help us to overcome these criticisms. As Erikson (1987: 222) notes, basic trust depends on the correlation between an individual’s inner feelings and one’s external environment. The establishment of a healthy basic trust in the infant is facilitated through the caregiver’s consistent response to the timely resolution of the child’s physical discomforts arising from fundamental needs. Conversely, maternal indifference to the infant’s needs results in the development of a maladaptive basic trust. Consequently, in the developmental trajectory of basic trust, the infant acquires the ability to rely on the consistencies within the external world and concurrently develops confidence in her capacity to navigate the irregularities that may manifest within this realm (Erikson 1987: 222). In other words, within the process of the formation of basic trust, individuals begin to recognize themselves, their own abilities, and capacities and thus, this process is shaped according to the individual’s qualities. Consequently, the development of basic trust is intricately woven into the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the agentic capacity and surrounding environment.

For that reason, similarly, within the framework of states, the manifestation of basic trust should not solely be contingent upon their interactions with significant actors in their environment; rather, it should be a consequence of a complex process wherein the states’ capacity to navigate their relationships plays a decisive role. States are compelled to engage in reflexive monitoring of both their internal and external milieu, guided by their inherent physical and institutional capacities, and construct a biographical narrative on “stable and predictable social relationships, either internally within states or externally with other international actors” (Ejdus 2017: 27).

The concept of agentic capacity can be broadly defined as the actor’s capability to realize its objectives. Agentic capacity encompasses various elements including the enforcement power such as military strength, administrative capacity denoting an effective bureaucracy, and institutional capacity reflecting the robustness of laws and norms (Bakir 2015: 69-71). The adoption of the generated biographical narrative by both internal and external actors hinges significantly on the capacity of the state as an actor.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, ontological security

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1 The regime type is not a decisive component of agentic capacity. In the realms of enforcement, administrative, and institutional capacity, one may encounter formidable democratic states, but conversely, democracies may exhibit vulnerabilities in governance and institutions, particularly evident in newly-emergent democratic formations. This

could be formulated as an actor's "own project of the self at a certain environment", wherein the "own project" is contingent on the actor's subjective interpretation and capacity, and the "certain environment" encompasses both internal and external factors.

Therefore, these three factors (agentic capacity, internal and external environments) which are the main determinants of actors' basic trust type designate the boundaries of states' options to create their own protective cocoon. A state with limited capabilities, formidable neighbors, and diverse domestic interest groups would possess a maladaptive basic trust, prompting it to adhere to established routines and identities. Conversely, a state with ample capabilities would exhibit a healthy basic trust and greater maneuverability, both internally and externally. The level of capabilities and behaviors of external and domestic actors affects that states' range of action. This formulation would help to interpret the different policy choices of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

## The Self Projects of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in a "Shifting Environment"

Despite some political, historical, and cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, it is possible to observe that their ontological securities are formed through a similar protective cocoon that based upon routinized relations with several similar internal and external actors within their respective environments. The first internal factor is the longstanding division between Sunni and Shi'a communities, which dates to the first *fitna* among Muslims. Both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are Sunni-dominated, with a Shi'a minority that creates internal tensions. The second internal factor is tribalism, which prevails in many states in the region. Historically, societies in both countries have been strictly divided among powerful tribes. The third factor is the Ikhwan-based groups, strong Sunni movements that are currently considered rival to these regimes. Both countries have influential Ikhwan communities. Against these three internal factors both actors strive to follow policies promoting Sunni population and ruling tribe and pressurizing Ikhwan-related factions. The rentier economic structure and royal factionalism have been played fundamental role in maintaining these policies.

In terms of external environment, the two actors' routinized behaviors against three distinct states stand out significantly. First, Iran, as a Shi'a-dominated country, aims to extend its influence throughout the region, creating external tensions for both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Secondly, Israel, viewed as an occupier of Muslim lands, particularly Palestinian territories, has complicated Arab-Israel relations for an extended period. Both actors have avoided direct relations with it. Thirdly, for these countries, their relationship with the United States as a security provider is vital for maintaining the continuity of their self-identity, even though the US has close ties with Israel. Therefore, due to the fragmented social structure and

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dynamic is similarly applicable to authoritarian regimes. Therefore, it is not feasible to assert that authoritarian regimes, which do not allow public influence in decision-making processes, possess a stronger capacity to alter their routines compared to democracies. Turkey serves as an illustrative example of this situation. Despite having a relatively established democratic structure compared to other states in the region, Turkey has undergone profound changes in its practices and narratives in recent years, driven by strong enforcement, bureaucratic, and institutional power (Adisonmez and Onursal 2022).

significant external threats, these countries need to position themselves both externally and internally with a protective cocoon, based on the dominance of the strongest tribe in society and the embracing of traditional Shi-based concerns and anti-Israel stance, along with a recent anti-Ikhwan position.

Despite possessing a similar protective cocoon, the variance of their basic trust level leads to the formulation of distinct policies by the two actors. The divergence in the levels of basic trust between the two actors is rooted in significant disparities within their internal and external environments, as well as in their agentic capacities.

Within the internal context, in Saudi Arabia, despite the presence of political and religious opposition groups within the country dissatisfied with the governance of the Saudi regime, the regime's repressive policies hinder these movements from posing a threat to itself (Alboauh and Mahoney 2017: 245). This situation, when observed externally, creates an appearance of societal cohesion within the society. On the other hand, in Kuwait, the Shi'a minority and Ikhwan-affiliated groups, which are relatively strong and have possible linkages with external actors such as Iran, limits Kuwait's policy options (Abloshi 2017: 126-129). In terms of external environment, Saudi Arabia occupies a pivotal position in the status quo bloc, which endeavors to preserve stability in the region against Iran's expansionist Shi'ite policies and revisionist efforts against the Western-backed regional order. From the Saudi perspective, the US is a crucial partner in this enterprise, and from the US perspective, Saudi Arabia is considered an indispensable agent for safeguarding US interests in the region (Al-Aloosy 2020: 437). Like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has strong ties with the United States, and the 1990 invasion of Iraq demonstrated the reliability of the US and its essential role in safeguarding Kuwait's security. Nonetheless, the limited military capabilities of Kuwait have engendered a greater reliance on the protective measures of the US, thus rendering it challenging to detach itself from its US patron. Furthermore, the precarious nature of the political landscape characterized by heightened existential anxieties stemming from various threats including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran has further exacerbated the uncertainties faced by the Kuwaiti regime (Assiri 2019; Katzman 2012; Ahrari 1993).

In addition to the differences in internal and external environments, the agentic capacity of the two actors also plays a significant role in shaping the basic trust of the actors and the formation of the associated protective cocoon. Saudi Arabia, as a rentier state,<sup>2</sup> adroitly leverages its oil revenues to engender public backing and project itself as the genuine representatives of Islamic and tribal traditions (Mabon 2012: 537-538). The role of the custodian of the "two holy places" forestalls the emergence of internal threats and promotes social cohesion. Additionally, the relatively robust enforcement capabilities and the powerful bureaucracy rooted in the royal family provide a certain degree of autonomy to the regime in the state-society relationship (Noneman 2005: 324-328). On the other hand, even though Kuwait is also a rentier state, the lack of powerful enforcement capabilities and the existence of powerful opposition groups

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2 Rentier state is a concept that defines the state which can gain substantial income from its natural resources and its economic power is based mainly on this "natural gift". Generally, in rentier states, the political elites play an active role in the distribution and utilization of this wealth and formulate its domestic and foreign policies in line with this strategic commodity such as oil, natural gas and others. (Beblawi 1987; Altunışık 2014).

limit the regime's autonomy in the state-society relations (Ghabra 1997: 58-59). Furthermore, the relatively recently established semi-democratic political structure's fragile nature and weak institutions further weaken the state's ability to cope with internal and external crises.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia's relatively stable internal environment, strong leadership role in its external surroundings, and comparatively robust political structure provide a conducive foundation for the development of a healthy basic trust. On the other hand, the combination of Kuwait's relatively weak capabilities, intricate domestic politics, and an uncertain foreign policy environment has led to the development of a maladaptive basic trust, which forces it to stick with its established routines within its current biographical narrative and diplomatic relations in critical situations. This situation is evident in the divergent policies pursued by the two actors during the Arab uprisings and the normalization process with Israel.

## **Case I: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait During the Arab Uprisings**

As mentioned earlier, the importance of the ontological security emerges during the critical situations that disrupt the routines of the actors and their basic trusts indeed. Both Arab uprisings and the normalization with Israel process could be seen as this type of critical situation. To begin with, the Arab uprisings amplified the level of anxiety experienced by countries in the region (Salloukh 2013: 43). Notably, the overthrow of long-standing regimes in Libya and Egypt raised concerns that all regimes in the region could face a similar fate. Therefore, the Arab uprisings represented a direct challenge to these countries. Also, following the Ikhwan's success in Egypt, the Ikhwan-based democracy model was intensively discussed in the region and Ikhwan's affiliates became visible, which inflamed the traditional revisionist concern within the GCC countries, and particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain (Milton-Edwards 2015: 102). The Ikhwan-affiliated groups posed a potential threat to the domestic order and the regional-global positioning of these regimes by offering a reform-based Islamist system in the domestic arena, adopting a critical approach towards Western countries, a radical pro-Palestine position, and a favorable stance towards Iran in external relations. As a result, the rise of potential threats and pervasive sentiments about the Ikhwan became a crucial existential question for their protective cocoon that these states had to confront to ensure the survival of their respective regimes.

Saudi Arabia's policies towards the Ikhwan during the Arab uprisings are a clear indication that it has a healthy basic trust. Before the uprisings, the Saudi regime had a complex relationship with the Ikhwan. Saudi Arabia was the most important supporter and shelter of the Ikhwan members who were suppressed and exiled by the Egyptian regime in the 1950s. During the 1990s, the Saudi regime crushed them with other Islamist movements which criticized Saudi Arabia's close collaboration with the US during the Gulf War (Hedges and Cafiero 2017: 130-134). However, the Saudi regime still saw its relations with the Ikhwan as an important part of its legitimacy, and did not marginalize them completely, but only defined them as groups that needed to be kept under control.

However, during the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia underwent significant changes in its routines towards this organization, both in terms of domestic and regional policies, in response



to the growing influence of the Ikhwan. In the domestic political context, the Saudi regime transitioned the status of the Ikhwan from an entity that needed to be “controlled actor” to a “terrorist actor” status. Also, all activities of the Ikhwan, which had previously been permitted in a limited manner within the country, have been prohibited (BBC 2014). Similarly, on the regional policy level, the Saudi regime has made significant changes to its routines concerning the movement. The most significant example is the GCC Internal Security Pact, allowed for extensive cooperation between members aimed at exerting pressure on domestic opposition groups. The Saudi Arabian government extended the GCC’s mandate, which had originally been designed to address external threats in the region, to encompass domestic threats (Yom 2020: 5; Kneuer et al 2018: 7-8). Furthermore, the Saudi regime supported the military coup that took place in Egypt in July of 2013, thus thwarting the potential progress of the Ikhwan’s rise. In addition, countries led by Saudi Arabia provided substantial economic assistance to the new military regime under the leadership of Abdelfattah al-Sisi in Egypt, viewing it as a crucial counterbalance to the rise of the Ikhwan. This event marked a substantial shift in the relationship between these Gulf countries and Ikhwan groups (Hedges and Cafiero 2017: 133-134).

The formation of Saudi Arabia’s healthy basic trust to be able to alter this biographical narrative is primarily influenced by agentic capacity and the nature of its internal and external environment. In the context of the internal environment, firstly, the weakening of the Ikhwan during the 1990s due to government policies prevented the Ikhwan from generating a strong reaction in Saudi Arabia during the Arab uprisings, as they did in countries like Egypt. Additionally, in the context of the sharia-law governed Saudi Arabia, defining opposition to the state as religiously prohibited hindered public support for protests, unlike in other countries, which creates relatively “secure” domestic environment in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, in the context of the external environment, the existence of regimes in the region that were apprehensive about both the Arab uprisings and the rise of the Ikhwan as political forces created a conducive environment for the formation of a strong bloc against the Ikhwan.

In terms of the agentic capacity, the Saudi regime’s relatively strong enforcement power and highly centralized, royal family-based administrative structure allowed it to impose new routines on society for defining the Ikhwan as a “terrorist” movement. The deployment of the police force to quell protests, the regime’s ability to portray the protests as a ploy of Shi’a Iran, and, lastly, the announcement of a billion-dollar aid package to mitigate public backlash, have collectively paved the way for Saudi Arabia to adapt to the changing dynamics posed by the increasing threat of the Ikhwan and the insufficient resonance of the Arab uprisings in the kingdom. Also, as part of Saudi Arabia’s agentic capacity, the leadership position of the status quo axis in the region, has enabled the Saudi regime to reflect its changes in domestic political routines onto the foreign policy arena. Moreover, it has even directed the GCC, the most significant institutional structure in the region, to alter its routines.

During the Arab uprisings, the rise of the Ikhwan led to Kuwait having similar concerns as Saudi Arabia, but due to its maladaptive basic trust, Kuwait found itself compelled to maintain its routines rather than altering them. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has refrained from categorizing the Ikhwan as a terrorist organization and has avoided joining a regional anti-Ikhwan bloc, declining to endorse the GCC Internal Security Pact. The underlying factor

that led to the persistence of Kuwait's routines is its maladaptive basic trust, influenced by both internal and external environments, as well as its agentic capacity. In terms of internal environment, unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait had a strong Ikhwan presence. Therefore, the Arab uprisings also led to strong street protests in Kuwait. Consequently, concerns emerged about the increasing power of the Ikhwan, similar to what occurred in Tunisia and Egypt, given their critical role in Kuwait's political landscape. Thus, the Arab uprisings led to the deepening of the competition between domestic political actors, where opposition groups were strong and caused the emergence of a governmental crisis. This resulted in the dissolution of the existing cabinet and parliament, and the declaration of new elections (Freer 2015: 1-2). Its external environment has also had a deepening effect on Kuwait's ongoing crisis. The increasing influence of the Ikhwan across the region and Saudi Arabia's intervention in states where uprisings have occurred, as in Bahrain, left Kuwait somewhat caught between two fires.

Under these internal and external conditions, Kuwait's weak enforcement capacity and institutional power, particularly its fragile semi-democratic political structure, have led to the formation of the maladaptive basic trust that binds it to existing routines. Similar to Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti government also attempted to alleviate the increasing tension within the country by distributing money to the public and later tried to suppress the protests through the use of violence (Ulrichsen 2014: 221-225). However, the failure of these measures in bringing an end to the demonstrations is a clear indicator of Kuwait's relatively weak agentic capacity.

## **Case II: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait During the Normalization Process with Israel**

The US-led normalization policy with Israel is also a critical issue for these regimes. The normalization process was an important pillar of the Donald Trump Administration's Middle East policy, which focused on bolstering Israel's political-military standing in the Middle East and curtailing Iran's military-political influence. Notwithstanding, relations with Israel have always been the subject of deep-seated criticism by both regimes and societies throughout the region. Therefore, the normalization process directly impinges upon the core facets of these regimes' protective cocoon. Also, the Trump Administration's support for historically symbolic issues such as Jerusalem and its push for normalization have exacerbated the disagreements between these actors and their crucial security provider.

Saudi Arabia's healthy basic trust is manifested by its moderate stance regarding its approach to Israel during the normalization process, which requires a deeper transformation in Saudi Arabia's protective cocoon and biographical narrative beyond what have been generated by the Arab uprisings. This transformation necessitates the Saudi regime, which has long upheld the identity of being the protector of two holy sites and the true representative of Islam, to reformulate its hostility-based routines towards Israel, which is perceived as the greatest enemy of Islam by the regional populations, to friendship or at least partnership. Even though the Palestinian issue has always been one of the solid aspects of its biographical narrative, Saudi Arabia emerged as a supporter of the normalization process. As officially unveiled by Saudi Arabia's Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud, Riyadh welcomed the normalization process

by considering it as positive for regional stability. The Saudi regime demonstrated its consent to the normalization process by permitting over flights of its airspace for Israeli civil aviation and facilitating direct travel for *haj* pilgrims from Israel (Feierstein and Guzansky 2022). Additionally, it was announced that normalization talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel were underway, and work was being done on an agreement until they were suspended due to the October 2023 Israel-Hamas conflict.

As in the example of the Arab uprisings, in the normalization process, Saudi Arabia's healthy basic trust has paved the way for changes of routines. In terms of internal environment, while it is possible to say that there is a visible pro-normalization segment within Saudi society, studies indicate that a significant majority of the population opposes it (Almayadeen 2023). However, the rigid stance of the Wahhabi ideology against opposing the state and the absence of an organized structure within society to raise its voice against it prevent the formation of an internal environment that would undermine the Saudi regime's move towards normalization.

In addition, the external environment was conducive to a change of Saudi regime's routines towards Israel. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Israel's shared concerns with the Saudi regime regarding the political situation in the region laid the groundwork for the normalization of relations between the two countries. Like the Saudi regime, Israel also positively received the anti-Ikhwan measures and supported the al-Sisi government and was concerned about Iran's rising influence in the region. In addition, the US administration, which has been main security provider of Saudi Arabia, encouraged these actors to counter the growing influence of Iran and curtail the rise of Ikhwan groups in the region. To achieve this objective, the administration welcomed their anti-Iranian policies and supported Israel's military actions against Iranian-backed Shia militias in Syria and Lebanon. Furthermore, the administration intensified the earlier rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, aimed at restructuring the political landscape of the Middle East during the US military withdrawal, by capitalizing on their shared threat perceptions.

Lastly in the context of agentic capacity, the central absolutist structure of the Saudi regime allows the government a wide range of maneuverability in situations where popular support for actions is weak. Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammed Salman's rise as a strong leader and his weakening of potential rivals in domestic politics have further centralized political power. Additionally, normalization with Israel constitutes a significant dimension of Salman's liberalization project in both domestic and foreign policy. Salman is directing all the political power the regime holds towards this liberalization project, which aims to transform Saudi Arabia from a regional actor to a global one, and consequently, towards the normalization process.

In the case of Kuwait and the normalization process, the country's maladaptive basic trust urged its ruling elite to stick with the existing routines. Its traditional position is grounded in an unwavering dedication to the Palestinian cause and the rejection of any normalization with Israel, which is referred to as the "Zionist Entity" (Middle East Monitor 2019). The sole condition for a potential normalization with Israel would be a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, which safeguards Palestinian rights and ends Israel's occupation of their territories.

In terms of internal environment, the socio-political landscape and public sentiment of Kuwait possess firm roots in anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian leanings, as can be attributed to the presence of effective Ikhwan-based political factions, influential Shi'a political movements, and the Palestinian diaspora residing within the nation (Parker 2020). This social support has been reflected in the National Assembly, as the country's unicameral legislative body, which has been dominated by pro-Arab and pro-Islamist factions, such as the Ikhwan-affiliated Hadas movement. Consequently, Kuwait's political landscape witnessed the emergence of a stronger pro-Palestinian stance, which is evidenced by the refusal of normalization by 37 Kuwaiti Members of Parliament (MPs), who declared in a statement that "the Kuwaiti people from all sects will not accept their government's unwillingness to stand for the cause of Arabs and early Muslim"(Middle East Monitor, 2020). This call urged the Kuwait government to reiterate its adherence to the long-decade policy that "the Palestinian cause is the first and most important issue to Arabs and Muslims" (Arab News 2022). This stance was reinforced by over 30 prominent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that rejected normalization as well (Anadolu Agency 2020a). Moreover, the presence of a sizable Palestinian community within Kuwait imposed pressure upon the government, despite the potential for geopolitical tensions with pro-normalization countries, such as the United States (Al-Monitor 2019; India Today 2020).

In terms of external environment, the US, being the primary driving force behind the normalization process and Kuwait's most significant security provider, and the positive stance of the status quo bloc with which Kuwait cooperates within the region seem to create a supportive milieu for Kuwait to enhance its relations with Israel. However, Iran, which Kuwait views as its most significant concern, maintains an uncompromising stance on normalization, which is considered the most significant factor keeping Kuwait committed to its routines in this regard (Mohammed 2020). Not surprisingly, Iran views the normalization process as "shameful" and has voiced its support for the Palestinian resistance against the "usurper regime" (Anadolu Agency 2020b). Iran perceives normalization as being in opposition to Islamic unity. Iran's strong relations with the Shi'ite population in Kuwait increase the likelihood of Kuwait experiencing Iran-backed turmoil in the event of a potential normalization step by the country.

Lastly, in the context of agentic capacity, the Kuwaiti regime has traditionally been sensitive to the Palestinian issue based on Pan-Arabist sentiments and consistently supported Palestine under all circumstances. Therefore, there is a consensus between the regime and Palestinian groups on the issue of normalization. However, during the period when normalization discussions arose, the drop in oil prices and the economic challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the power transition following the death of Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, have rendered the Kuwaiti regime relatively weaker (The Arab Weekly 2020). Consequently, it was not feasible for the weakened regime to change a routine which had strong public support.

## Conclusion

The primary motivation of states is their survival, given the multitude of threats present in the world. As such, states naturally prioritize their physical security in their behavior to ensure their continued existence. However, for states, like other social actors, "how" they

exist is as important as survival itself. Thus, via routinization, states develop a protective cocoon that provides answers to the basic existential questions that give meaning to their existence. Therefore, ontological security is as critical to state behavior as physical security. To understand state behavior within the framework of ontological security, it is crucial to investigate how states construct it. Ontological security is a self-project that states develop at a certain environment. In the development of this project, the most influential factor is the type of basic trust possessed by the actors involved. The formation of this basic trust relies on states' agentic capacity and their relationships with actors in both their internal and external environments. Basic trust directly impacts the behavior of states when faced with challenges. States with a healthy basic trust can adapt rapidly to new and critical situations by modifying established routines when their protective cocoon is threatened, while those with a maladaptive basic trust prefer to maintain the status quo and resist change.

This theoretical argument explains the contrasting behavioral choices of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait within the context of the Arab uprisings and the Israeli normalization process, both of which threatened their protective cocoons. Despite residing in a similar external environment, Saudi Arabia boasts a healthier basic trust, attributable to its agentic capacity as the "protector of Islamic holy places" and a "strategic partner" of the United States. This healthy basic trust enabled Saudi Arabia to reevaluate its threat perceptions during the Arab uprisings and adopt an aggressive foreign policy towards the rise of the Ikhwan. Similarly, in the normalization process with Israel, Saudi Arabia adopted a pro-normalization policy, despite intense domestic and regional opposition against Israel. In contrast, Kuwait, with a more fragmented social structure, less powerful agential capacity, and the pressure of influential actors like Saudi Arabia and Iran, has opted to maintain its traditional routines, reflecting its maladaptive basic trust. As a result, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has continued with its established routines during both the Arab uprisings and normalization processes.

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