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## The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen

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### ABSTRACT

Driven by increasing self-confidence and encouraged by Western states, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have gained a prominent role in multilateral efforts to foster peacebuilding in Yemen since the country experienced increased conflict from 2004 onwards. Based on the “negative and positive peace framework” proposed by Johan Galtung, it is possible to argue that the lack of focus of the GCC on fostering “positive peace” and disagreements between the Gulf monarchies heightened by hyper-nationalist tendencies inhibit the ability of this sub-regional organisation to facilitate peacebuilding in Yemen.

### KEYWORDS

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Yemen; (sub-)regional institutions; peacebuilding; positive peace

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has often been characterised in the literature as an “exceptional” case in terms of regionalism since most regional political and economic arrangements have failed to materialise within the region (Aarts 1999, 911). These failures have been attributed to a variety of reasons, including divergences in economic development (Carkoglu *et al.* 1998, 33), “state-to-nation incongruences” that pose challenges to the existing state system in the region (Miller 2003, 157) and the preoccupation of leaders with regime survival that has fostered the weak institutional designs of regional institutions (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 181).

The absence of effective regional and sub-regional institutions puts constraints on peacebuilding in the MENA region, as such institutions could offer forums in which consensus between states on joint action could be forged and institutionalised mechanisms of cooperation could be established in order to facilitate burden-sharing between states (Lepgold 2003, 23). In this article, the constraints of the low level of regionalisation in the MENA region on peacebuilding are examined through a case study on the engagement of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with peacebuilding in Yemen.

To this end, this article first engages with the literature on regionalisation and peacebuilding, with a specific focus on the GCC. It then delves into the institutional structure of the organisation and its interactions with Yemen, to eventually conclude that the exclusive focus of the GCC on “negative peace” in the country has inhibited its ability to contribute to peacebuilding as it has ignored structural inequalities that have been the main cause of conflict. Meanwhile, hyper-nationalist tendencies within the Gulf

monarchies following the Arab Uprisings have exacerbated tensions among GCC member states, further inhibiting the organisation's ability to formulate a regional approach to peacebuilding in Yemen.

### **(Sub-)regional organisations and peacebuilding**

The positive contribution that (sub-)regional organisations could make to establish regional peace has long been recognised by international institutions. The United Nations (UN) Charter of 1945 already noted the potential role regional agencies could play to facilitate the “*pacific settlement of local disputes*” (United Nations 1945, 11), while the European Union (EU) maintains that regional organisations could “*make an important contribution to a more orderly world*” (Council of the European Union 2009, 37).

However, in the International Relations (IR) literature, this relationship has been questioned. Realists have remained sceptical of the ability of (sub-)regional organisations to foster regional peace as they attach more importance to a stable balance of power within the region (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 1994–95). Liberal institutionalists are more optimistic and argue that (sub-)regional organisations could facilitate trust and mutual cooperation between states by providing information, monitoring agreements, reducing transaction costs and stimulating coordination that all are beneficial to foster regional peace (Keohane and Martin 1995).

Meanwhile, constructivists have outlined the role regional organisations could play in facilitating social processes that could transform regional security politics. One of these processes is the emergence of pluralistic security communities, a concept pioneered by Karl Deutsch (1957) and further developed by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (1998). Communities could potentially arise as a regional group of states have a desire to coordinate their policies because of external threats or economic, demographic or environmental change to mutual advantage. This could encourage the emergence of a (sub-)regional organisation in which policy coordination takes place and “*political actors learn and perhaps even ‘teach’ others what their interpretations of the situation and normative understandings are*” (Adler and Barnett 1998, 42). As a result, (sub-)regional organisations could play a vital role in the promotion of socialisation and learning, while encouraging actors to identify with each other and develop mutual trust. This, in turn, could contribute to the emergence of a collective identity, in which member states enact mutual self-restraint and define themselves as a group in relation to others. Constructivist accounts also assert that, in addition to transforming their regional environment through the establishment of pluralistic security communities, (sub-)regional organisations could foster peace by the adoption of common practices through which the values of the organisation are shared. This could include cooperative security practices that may help expand existing security communities (Adler 2008).

Given the existing literature on the extent to which the GCC represents a security community (Barnett and Gause 1998; Koch 2010), the focus in this article is on the practices that have been initiated by the GCC to facilitate regional peacebuilding. The concept of peacebuilding was first developed by Johan Galtung (1975, 298), who defined it as attempts “*to remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where war might occur*”. When discussing peacebuilding, Galtung (1969, 183) recognised two different types of peace that could be fostered, “*negative peace*” and “*positive peace*”.

While the former refers to the “absence of violence” and could be achieved in the international system through balance of power mechanisms and associative approaches, “positive peace” could be regarded as “the absence of structural violence”. By “structural violence”, Galtung refers to social structures (economic, political and legal systems) that lower the need satisfaction<sup>1</sup> of particular groups and communities below what is potentially possible.

Sub-regional organisations such as the GCC could provide a contribution to both “negative peace” and “positive peace”. The existing literature on the GCC has highlighted primarily the organisation’s contribution to the diffusion of “negative peace”. Several scholars have outlined how the founding of the organisation enabled the Gulf monarchies to counterbalance the ideational and material threats posed by their bigger neighbours Iraq and Iraq (Ramazani 1988; Kechichian 1985; Yom 2018) as it created a security alliance that helped to prevent both countries from becoming regional hegemons. Other scholars have demonstrated how the organisation has fostered “negative peace” through an associative approach, by bringing different parties together and establishing channels of communication for conflict resolution (Galtung 1985, 150–1). Rouhollah Ramazani (1988, 124) notes how the GCC helped to sponsor a resolution for the boundary dispute between Oman and South Yemen in 1982, and Michael Barnett and Gregory Gause (1998, 175–6) highlighted how the organisation contributed to the (temporary) resolution of a Qatari-Bahraini border dispute in 1986 and a Saudi-Omani border agreement in 1990.

However, several authors note that the contribution of the GCC to regional conflict management has been hampered by several constraints. Marco Pinfari (2009, 16–7) observes that the GCC has failed to present itself as a neutral and credible regional mediator, particularly in regional conflicts that involve Iran. Simultaneously, Mohammed Nuruzzaman (2015, 18) notes that the GCC has “no institutional approach or specific policies to facilitate the mediation of conflicts in the Middle East”. Although the GCC Charter refers to a “Commission for Settlement of Disputes” (Secretariat General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf 1981), this commission formally can only address disputes between GCC member states, while, in practice, no dispute has ever been referred to this institution (Pinfari 2009, 16).

Compared with the GCC contribution to “negative peace”, the fostering of “positive peace” by the Council has received less attention in the literature. Barnett and Gause (1998, 192) observe that the cooperation between the Gulf monarchies has reduced restrictions for Gulf citizens travelling between GCC states, enhancing freedom of movement. In the economic realm, it is noted the sub-regional organisation has been a driver of economic liberalisation, “weakening the ability of individual member states to control the movement of capital and goods within the intra-GCC space” (Hanieh 2011, 104). These regional projects have particularly benefitted large Gulf conglomerates as they enabled the latter to expand their business activities throughout the GCC region (146). Several authors observe that the GCC has fostered transnational connections between citizens and facilitated the rise of sub-regional professional organisations that fuel ideas for regional policy contributing to the emergence of a regional community (Barnett and Gause 1998; Hanieh 2011; Legrenzi 2015; Abdulla 2016). However, as there are no

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<sup>1</sup>Galtung identifies four classes of basic needs for human beings: survival needs, well-being needs, identity and meaning needs, and freedom needs (Galtung 1990, 292).

channels for popular participation to influence decision-making in the GCC, the possibilities for citizens to transform social structures that marginalise large parts of the population are limited (Sadiki 2020, 24).

The GCC's mixed record in fostering negative and positive peace is taken into account when examining its contribution to peacebuilding in Yemen. While peacebuilding as a concept has not yet been applied to the GCC, literature exists about its involvement in mediation in the region (Pinfari 2009; Nuruzzaman 2015), the extent to which it could be considered a security community (Barnett and Gause 1998; Koch 2010) and the position of the GCC within the regional security framework in the Persian Gulf (Kraig 2004; Miller 2019). By providing a case study on the contribution of the GCC to peacebuilding in Yemen, this article aims to add to the literature on regionalisation and peacebuilding.

## Regional transformations and the establishment of the GCC

Before delving into the relationship of the GCC with Yemen, some background is provided on the organisation. The founding of the GCC was spurred not by societal pressures but rather by the ruling elites of the Gulf monarchies, who had to deal with ruptures within the region after the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 and the Iran-Iraq war of 1980. These resulted in domestic pressures, as after the revolution, the Iranian leaders claimed a moral responsibility to export their revolution to other countries (Maloney 2002, 96–100) by supporting religiously inspired liberation movements (Ansari 2007, 179–80) that undermined the legitimacy of the ruling families in the Gulf monarchies. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 posed new regional challenges, as two states with large populations and excessive military capabilities threatened to drag the Gulf monarchies into the conflict (Anthony 2015).

The regionalisation that occurred in 1981 was fostered by a shared belief among the six ruling families that they could not face these challenges alone as their regime security was interdependent. This perception of interdependence was nurtured by common features in terms of ethnicity, political structure (dynastic monarchy), political economy (rentier economy),<sup>2</sup> culture (similarities in dress codes) and history (the pre-eminence of pearl hunting and desert life in the pre-oil era) (Partrick 2009, 31–2). These commonalities helped to provide a justification for the composition of the new sub-regional organisation and the exclusion of other Gulf states, such as North and South Yemen, Iraq and Iran, from it. The commonalities underlying membership in the organisation were emphasised in the GCC Charter, which highlighted the “special relations, common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam which bind them [GCC member states]” (Secretariat General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf 1981).

The founding of the organisation, therefore, was not an effort to transform existing social structures in the Gulf monarchies, but rather an attempt to reinforce them when facing domestic and regional challenges. This was also reflected in the institutional structure of the sub-regional organisation, which partly resembled the hierarchical

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of “rentier economy” refers to the reliance of the economies of the Gulf monarchies on external rents provided by the export of raw materials such as crude oil and natural gas. A small number of people are involved in the production of these external rents, and the revenues are accrued by the state, which subsequently distributes the external rents among the population.

domestic political structures of the Gulf monarchies. The most important institution of the GCC, the Supreme Council, brings together the heads of state, who meet once a year and set out the main policies of the organisation (Legrenzi 2002, 22). In line with the domestic political structures of the Gulf monarchies, the Supreme Council exercises “political, judicial and legislative control over all decisions taken by the organization” (Legrenzi 2015, 37–8). It therefore mirrors the patriarchal-consultative and informal procedures of decision-making at the domestic level (Hudson 1977, 167), in which the leaders aim to reach consensus (*ijma*) on resolutions, and deference within the Supreme Council is “accorded to more powerful players” (Legrenzi 2015, 90–1). The Council is assisted by Ministerial Councils and numerous technical committees that meet more regularly as they implement the resolutions of the Supreme Council (Yom 2018, 72). Alongside these institutions, there is a Secretariat-General, which prepares studies and assists member states in the implementation of the resolutions and recommendations of the Supreme Council and Ministerial Councils. Its role has remained constrained due to the dominance of the norm of sovereignty in the GCC as a result of the fear of the ruling families to cede sovereignty (Legrenzi 2015, 90). This has prevented the organisation from making binding decisions and creates inconsistency in formulating policy, impeding the ability of the organisation to contribute to peacebuilding in the region.

As a result, the GCC has rather remained a forum for policy coordination between member states (Legrenzi 2015, 89). This has manifested in the field of peacebuilding in which the GCC has long remained a passive player, providing cover for several mediation initiatives initiated by Saudi Arabia in Lebanon and Palestine (Kamrava 2013, 4–5) and by Qatar in Sudan (Kamrava 2011, 551). Meanwhile, regional initiatives initiated to encourage “positive peace” have also remained limited. The disbursement and implementation of humanitarian and development aid by GCC states, through which well-being could be fostered within the region, occurs primarily at the national level, with the GCC acting merely as a forum for coordination and informal consensus-building on the distribution of this aid (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 13).

### **GCC interaction with Yemen before 2011**

While the engagement of the GCC with peacebuilding in the region has been limited, an exception has to be made for the organisation’s engagement with Yemen. Particularly after the Yemeni uprising of 2011, the Council has played a significant role in conflict mediation in the country, effectively supplanting the Arab League, which had intervened in previous crises in Yemen in 1948, 1963, 1972, 1974, 1979 and 1994 (Pinfari 2016).

This points towards an increasingly assertive stance of the GCC states compared with the past, when they had rather tried to insulate themselves from the challenges that sprang from Yemen. These challenges emanated from ideological differences, as particularly the Marxist government of the People Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in South Yemen was considered a threat by the Gulf monarchies due to its support for socialist groups that undermined regime security (Al-Muslimi 2016). To counter this, Saudi Arabia, the most dominant country in the GCC, opted for a ‘divide and rule’ policy between North and South Yemen as it feared the threat that would emanate from a united Yemen (Burke 2012, 7–9). After the Yemeni reunification in 1990, the relationship between the country and the GCC states soured further, as the Yemeni government

supported Iraq during its invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War of 1990–1991 (Al-Muslimi 2016). This resulted in terminating financial aid from the GCC states and the expulsion of Yemeni workers from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Burke 2012, 9). Meanwhile, border disputes between Saudi Arabia and Yemen in 1995, 1997 and 1998 (Okruhlik and Conge 1999, 237–5) further fuelled hostility and conceptions of Yemen as the threatening ‘other’.

Nonetheless, the Saudi-Yemeni border agreement signed in 2000 transformed their contentious relationship and allowed for further engagement of the GCC with Yemen. Already in 1996, the Yemeni government articulated its desire to become a member of the organisation. Headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had become President of North Yemen in 1979 and retained this position after the unification of Yemen in 1990, the Yemeni government sought membership as it aimed to gain further access to development aid and investment capital from the GCC states in order to spur economic growth (Johnsen 2008). In December 2001, the Supreme Council expressed its support for eventual membership. Yemen was allowed to join the GCC Ministerial Councils for health, labour and social affairs (Legrenzi 2015, 204), and the Council promised the country “participation in the field of economy and other fields of cooperation” (GCC Supreme Council 2001). So far, this has remained an aspiration, though. Despite attempts by the Yemeni government to align its regulations and legislation with those of the other GCC states (Burke 2012, 23–6), it has been prevented from joining the economic bodies of the GCC.

Full Yemeni membership of the GCC has remained sensitive given its large population and the republican nature of the Yemeni regime that contrasts with the decision-making structure in the Gulf monarchies, in which ruling families have “claimed an exclusive right to rule and to dispose of the resources of the state as they see fit” (Chubin and Tripp 1993, 26). Allowing Yemen with its republican constitution into the GCC could further increase pressure on the Gulf monarchies to create more democratic avenues within the organisation that could undermine the control of the ruling families. Meanwhile, the massive economic disparity between the Gulf monarchies and Yemen has further heightened its ‘otherness’ and reduced popular support for its inclusion in the GCC. Within government circles and regional media, Yemeni membership of the organisation has been linked to a large flow of Yemeni migration towards GCC states, representing a societal threat that could undermine the privileged access of the national population in the Gulf monarchies to hydrocarbon wealth (Burke 2012, 16).

These ideas centring around Yemen’s ‘otherness’ have been compounded by the fragmentation in Yemen, in which the Yemeni state “never had the ability to enforce rules or held a monopoly over the means of violence” (Clausen 2018, 561), in contrast with the Gulf monarchies where the ruling families have been able to impose a monopoly on violence over the entire territory of their respective states. Strong regional, tribe and clan identities are the primary markers of political identification for a large part of the Yemeni population (Chubin and Tripp 1993, 23), and a central state that has legitimacy and operates according to rational-legal logic has failed to emerge. Different non-state actors compete for access to state resources in Yemen (Clausen 2018, 562), a contestation that is sharpened by the imminent depletion of oil and water reserves and environmental degradation that the country faces (Coates Ulrichsen 2011, 150). This contestation escalated in 2004, when the Houthi rebellion broke out. The rebellion erupted after

a respected religious scholar, Husayn al-Houthi, tapped into feelings of discrimination, neglect and resentment among the country's Zaidi community, a rationalist offshoot of Shia Islam that is distinct from Twelver Shi'ism (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 4–16). Although al-Houthi was killed after the first spell of fighting, the indiscriminate violence used by the regime, as well as the destruction of civil infrastructure and internal displacement, further aggravated support for the Houthi rebellion among the local population in the Zaidi stronghold of Saada (Clausen 2018, 564). Eventually, five successive rounds of conflict erupted between the Yemeni army and the Houthis, straining Yemeni security forces, shattering civilian infrastructure and affecting the already limited social services offered by the state. This decline in services, in turn, spurred the emergence of the Southern secessionist movement, which gained momentum in 2009 and 2010, while also facilitating the growing presence of Al-Qaida in the country (Coates Ulrichsen 2011, 155–7).

The situation in Yemen during the first decade of the 21st century contrasted with that in the Gulf monarchies, which were experiencing the emergence of a “Gulf moment” (Abdulla 2010) that was characterised by political stability and prosperity facilitated by an increase in hydrocarbon revenues. The growing self-confidence of the GCC states, which increasingly asserted themselves on the regional stage underpinned by increasing economic and military resources, invited pressure from Western countries on the GCC to act in Yemen (Ehteshami 2015, 16), where the growing presence of Al-Qaida from 2004 onwards raised international concerns. The Gulf monarchies were eager to take on this new role despite limitations in terms of their institutional capacity to formulate and implement an assertive foreign policy (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 8). In 2006, the GCC sponsored a conference in which the Gulf monarchies committed themselves to a fourfold increase in development spending (Croft 2010). In this instance, the lack of institutional capacity of GCC states became visible, as a significant amount of this pledged financial aid failed to reach Yemen as a result of their failure to provide sufficient resources to their development agencies to oversee aid spending. Nonetheless, the Gulf monarchies retained their prominent position in multilateral efforts to enhance domestic stability in Yemen (Hill and Nonnemann 2011, 13).

Qatar especially was heavily involved in these efforts. Eager to boost its international prestige, assert its autonomy from the other Gulf monarchies and further its influence in Yemen, Qatar became involved in mediation to resolve the domestic conflict between the Houthis and the government in 2007, 2008 and 2010. Qatari efforts to foster a peace agreement between the Houthis and the Yemeni government consisted of a pledge to provide reconstruction funds for the Saada region and offering exile to Houthi leaders in Doha. However, the lack of mutual trust among the GCC states became visible through the actions of Saudi Arabia, which used its patronage of Yemeni tribes and its formal and informal contacts to prevent the peace agreement brokered by Qatar (Kamrava 2011, 550–6). For Saudi Arabia, preservation of its position as the main power broker in Yemen remained of vital importance, particularly as the Houthis strongly resisted Saudi interference in North Yemen through its tribal patronage. Therefore, Saudi Arabia sought a full military defeat of the Houthis (551). To do so, it tried to strengthen the military capabilities of the Saleh regime to combat the Houthi rebellion and it even became directly involved in the conflict in 2009, when the Houthis extended their insurgency to Saudi territory and killed a Saudi border guard. Saudi ground and air forces were

deployed against the Houthis in a military campaign during which the Saudi army suffered significant losses but was able to prevent further incursions into its territory (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 17–8).

The military approach favoured by Saudi Arabia prevented a more comprehensive approach centred around “positive peace” that would address the political and socio-economic issues central to the conflicts in Yemen. Despite this, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies remained at the forefront of attempts of Western countries to stabilise Yemen. In 2010, the GCC and its member states became part of the new “Friends of Yemen” group, which was established by the United Kingdom to initiate a strategic partnership between Western countries and the Gulf states to foster state-building in Yemen. The Gulf monarchies were deemed vital partners in this effort because of their significant financial resources as well as their formal and informal channels with the Yemeni government and non-state actors that could help to influence developments on the ground (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 4).

### **The GCC and the political transition in Yemen**

The plans for state-building in Yemen articulated within the Friends of Yemen group were thwarted by the Arab Uprisings that swept the region from the beginning of 2011 onwards. The regional turmoil briefly united the ruling families in the Gulf, as they were driven by a shared belief that their regime security was interdependent and it was in their interests to preserve Arab monarchies that faced large-scale protests. Through means such as military intervention, with the deployment of the GCC Peninsula Shield Force in Bahrain in March 2011, and the provision of financial aid, with Bahrain and Oman receiving USD 20 billion from the four other GCC states, an attempt was made to support the regimes in the poorer GCC member states that faced large-scale popular protests. Meanwhile, financial aid was also extended to support other Arab monarchies, with Morocco and Jordan becoming the beneficiaries of a new USD 10 billion GCC fund (Beck 2015, 195–7).

The regional turmoil also encouraged an unprecedented engagement of the GCC in Yemen. This was in reaction to the wave of protests that reached Yemen in February 2011 as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in the capital Sanaa and multiple provincial cities to demand Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s resignation. The protests were fostered by widespread grievances over political corruption and social decay in Yemen (Jones 2011, 19). Driven by a common desire to prevent the unrest in Yemen from spilling over into other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, the six Gulf monarchies allowed the GCC Secretariat to negotiate on their behalf to find a political settlement and avoid a civil war between President Saleh and his many domestic opponents (Burke 2012, 28).

With the so-called “GCC initiative” that garnered widescale regional and international support, the Secretariat manifested itself as a competent player in fostering “negative peace” that was able to facilitate political transition (Isaac 2014, 425–6). The GCC initiative provided a short-term solution for the political paralysis in Yemen as President Saleh handed his presidential powers to his Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in exchange for immunity and maintaining his position as head of the ruling General People’s Congress. It safeguarded a role for the GCC to influence Yemen’s

trajectory, while pretending to cave in to some demands of the protestors by calling for a release of unlawfully detained people and the formation of a national unity government that was supposed to govern by consensus (Lackner 2016, 8).

Nevertheless, the initiative maintained the “old system of powers” (Colombo 2012, 120) that concentrated wealth and power among rival elites in Yemen and failed to address the social structures that partly gave rise to the uprising. The GCC initiative even contributed to the marginalisation of certain social groups, as it excluded the youth civic movements that had been central in the protests out of fear that their inclusion could encourage the emergence of similar youth movements in the GCC states. This was further compounded by the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that was part of the GCC initiative, in which young activists who led the uprising in Yemen and dissident groups such as the Houthis and the separatist Southern Movement were underrepresented (Carapico 2015). While agreeing on the need to make Yemen a federal entity, no agreement was found at the NDC on the number of federal regions that should be created and their boundaries. This was decided by the 22-member Committee of Regions, which was handpicked and chaired by President Hadi and unrepresentative of Yemeni society. It delineated six new federal regions, a proposal that was outrightly rejected or met with reservations by most of the major political movements in Yemen, such as the Houthis, the Southern Movement, the Socialist Party and the Salafi Rashad Union (Thiel 2015).

Hence, while the GCC initiative initially managed to establish a temporary “negative peace” between political elites that buttressed the influence of the Gulf monarchies in the future trajectory of Yemen, it failed to sufficiently address the marginalisation of certain social groups and contribute to a comprehensive “positive peace” that could offer a more sustainable solution to the crisis by transforming those social structures that had encouraged the uprising of 2011. Substantial parts of the patronage system established by Saleh remained intact, partly also through the budgetary support provided to the Hadi government by the GCC states. This guaranteed Hadi’s support base among the military-security apparatus and prominent tribes but failed to enhance the legitimacy of the regime. This lack of domestic legitimacy became critical in 2014, after the Hadi government cut fuel subsidies and reduced cash support for poor Yemenis (Salisbury 2018, 16–7). The Houthis, dissatisfied with the new federal system that restricted their sphere of influence, exploited this situation to seize the capital city of Sanaa in September 2014 (Thiel 2015). This clipped the wings of President Hadi, who was put under house arrest in January 2015 and subsequently resigned from his position. He managed to flee to Aden, where he rescinded his resignation, resulting in a Houthi decree that annulled all constitutional processes and handed power to the leadership of the militia (Lackner 2018, 11).

### **Hyper-nationalism and the collapse of GCC unity**

Following this annulment, the Houthis advanced on Aden (Salisbury 2018, 17), illustrating the failure of the GCC initiative to ensure a sustainable political solution to prevent the occurrence of violence in Yemen. In response to this, President Hadi requested the GCC to intervene militarily in support of his government on 24 March 2015 (*Al Jazeera* 2015). While the GCC Ministerial Council had issued a statement in January 2015 in which it called the house arrest of President Hadi “a

coup against legitimacy” (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2015a), divisions appeared among the GCC states after Hadi’s request. A statement was issued two days later, in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait responded positively to Hadi’s request, noting the threat posed to regional security by the backers of the Houthi militias, that is, “regional powers aimed at hegemony on Yemen” (a clear reference to Iran), and the military build-up of Houthi militias near the Saudi border (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2015b). Notably absent from the statement was Oman, which rejected the military intervention and opted for a neutral position, suggesting to use its offices to bring the conflict in Yemen to an end (Bianco and Stansfield 2018, 618). As a result of the opt-out of Oman, the GCC became not an active participant in the military intervention. It forced Saudi Arabia to assemble a so-called “coalition of the willing” to support the military intervention in Yemen in March 2015. This coalition eventually included the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt and Sudan, with the UAE becoming Saudi Arabia’s *de facto* junior partner in the war (Hokayem and Roberts 2016, 171–2).

The division over the military intervention in Yemen highlights the disarray that has inhibited the GCC from building forth on its involvement in the political transition in the country in 2011 to acquire a more prominent role in fostering regional security. Saudi King Abdullah aimed for such a role. In December 2011, he floated an initiative to establish a political federation between the Gulf monarchies that would align foreign and defence policies to counter the threat posed by Iran. This initiative followed an earlier Saudi proposal to admit two other Arab monarchies, Jordan and Morocco, to the GCC (Isaac 2014, 415). These initiatives, however, were resisted by smaller Gulf monarchies such as Oman, Kuwait and Qatar.

The smaller Gulf monarchies have sought to maintain their sovereignty in an increasingly threatening environment, as growing insecurities among ruling elites about regime security following the Arab Uprisings have fostered what Madawi Al-Rasheed (2018) has called a wave of “hyper-nationalism” in the Gulf monarchies. Through assertions of identity, ruling elites have tried to instil a sense of superiority among the national population that has driven the interventionist policies enacted by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar (19–22). This has spurred conflicting policies among the GCC states, which has further reduced the ability of the sub-regional organisation to contribute to peacebuilding in the region.

Fault lines among the GCC states over how to respond to Iranian resurgence and the rise of political Islam after the Arab Uprisings have been deepened as several Gulf monarchies assert their separate identities to carve out an independent regional role for themselves. Saudi Arabia’s has presented itself as the protector of the Sunni community against Shia-Iranian expansion (Al-Rasheed 2018, 10), also in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia has justified the military intervention by framing the Houthis as an Iranian proxy that has deliberately frustrated the GCC-brokered political transition (Clausen 2018, 568–9). It has presented Iran as an existential threat to stability in Yemen and the wider region that requires Riyadh “to undermine and undercut Iran whenever and wherever possible” (Kamrava 2018, 608), resulting in growing uneasiness among GCC member states such as Oman, Kuwait and Qatar that have been more conciliatory towards Iran.

Alongside Saudi Arabia, the UAE has asserted itself as a force for religious moderation in the region in order to justify its regional campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated Islamist organisations that it considers an ideological threat. This campaign clashes with the regional foreign policy of Qatar, which has carved out a role for itself as a force of change in the region through *Al Jazeera's* extensive and sympathetic reporting of the Arab Uprisings and its financial and political support for individuals and groups in the region affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood (Roberts 2017, 546–8). Conflicts as a result of these different assertions of identity have come to the fore in 2014 and 2017. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in protest as they accused Qatar of interference in internal affairs of other GCC states due to its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and certain Yemeni opposition groups (Bianco and Stansfield 2018, 620). Relations were only restored when Qatar indicated its willingness to make concessions on its foreign policy (Yom 2018, 77). This, however, did not resolve tensions over Qatar's regional policy, and, on 5 June 2017, a blockade was imposed on Qatar by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (El Yaacoubi 2017). The blockade forced Qatar to withdraw from the military coalition in Yemen and brought the GCC into further disarray. It represented a disregard of the norm of sovereignty that had been central to the functioning of the GCC, with the four blockading countries demanding Qatar to align “with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically” (Bianco and Stansfield 2018, 615). In addition to demands to cut all ties with Iran, Qatar was also urged to sever its ties with organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, shut down *Al Jazeera* and terminate its military cooperation with Turkey (Wintour 2017).

The different assertions of identity fostered by the wave of hyper-nationalism in the region have even heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen. While Saudi Arabia has primarily aimed to restore Hadi's government control over state institutions in order to curtail the Houthis and prevent Iran from gaining a foothold in the country, the UAE has been more suspicious of the central government given the presence of several prominent members of *al-Islah* (an Islamist party affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood) in it (El Yaacoubi 2017). Instead, it has thrown its support behind the secessionist forces of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), undermining the unity of Yemen. The conflicting policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have further increased tensions in South Yemen and even led to clashes between paramilitary forces of the STC and the Hadi government in August 2019 (Salisbury 2020, 34). These tensions were (temporarily) resolved with the adoption of the “Riyadh Agreement” that was signed in November 2019 and allowed for power-sharing between the STC and the Hadi government in South Yemen (Ghobari and El Yaacoubi 2020).

These tensions originating from (hyper-)nationalist assertions of identity currently impede the GCC to play a significant role in peacebuilding in Yemen. Although the blockade against Qatar was lifted in January 2021, the rift between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain further accentuated national differences (Coates Ulrichsen 2021) and fostered mutual distrust. This is likely to further entrench the norm of sovereignty in the organisation and limit the possibility for more effective cooperation between GCC member states in the realm of regional peacebuilding in the near future.

## Conclusion

Liberal institutionalist and constructivist accounts have highlighted the potential contribution regional organisations could provide to regional peacebuilding. This study on the contribution of the GCC to peacebuilding in Yemen rather concurs with the more sceptical realist accounts as it has revealed the shortcomings of this sub-regional organisation in regional peacebuilding. The preoccupation of the ruling elites in the Gulf monarchies with their own survival has resulted in regional cooperation within the GCC that has particularly revolved around fostering a “negative peace” and in limited efforts to transform social structures and improve citizens’ quality of life in the Gulf. This is also reflected in the efforts of the GCC to encourage peacebuilding in Yemen, which have mainly focused on fostering “negative peace”. Although the signing of the border agreement between Saudi Arabia and Yemen in 2000 enabled further engagement of the sub-regional organisation with Yemen, the GCC lacks a clear vision of how to develop and integrate the country further into the organisation, which has resulted in an ambiguous policy towards Yemen. This ambiguity can be explained by concerns about Yemen’s ‘otherness’ in comparison to the Gulf monarchies, given economic disparities, the country’s republican political system and its fragile state with the absence of an effective functioning state. This has decreased support for Yemeni membership in the GCC among the national populations as well as ruling elites in the Gulf monarchies.

The eruption of the Houthi rebellion in 2004 and increasing fragmentation of the country encouraged a growing engagement of the GCC states with peacebuilding in Yemen through their participation in multilateral initiatives and Qatari mediation in the conflict between the Houthis and the Yemeni government. However, for a long time, an effective common approach failed to develop among the GCC states. Qatari mediation efforts were undermined by Saudi Arabia as it was suspicious about growing Qatari influence in its neighbouring country, highlighting the lack of mutual trust that exists between some GCC member states.

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 briefly encouraged greater unity among the GCC states, driven by a shared belief that their regime security was interdependent. This also resulted in an unprecedented role of the GCC Secretariat, which gained a central role in facilitating a political transition following the uprisings in Yemen in 2011. However, the peace agreement it helped to negotiate resulted only in a brief “negative peace” that mainly reinforced the old systems of power in the country. Failure to use the transition to transform social structures kept structural inequalities intact and eventually fuelled the popular discontent that facilitated the advance of the Houthi militias in 2014, prompting the Saudi-led military intervention of 2015.

While the GCC Secretariat’s involvement in easing political transition in Yemen in 2011 could have been the prelude to a growing role of the sub-regional organisation in fostering regional peacebuilding, this has been hampered by a wave of hyper-nationalism through which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar assert identities that advocate conflict-ing policies. This has further complicated the formulation of a common GCC policy and impedes its ability to contribute to peacebuilding in Yemen and the wider region.

The case of Yemen therefore sheds light on the impediments to regionalism in the MENA region. Similar to Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen (2007), this case study found that the narrow preoccupation with regime security in the region has fostered mutual distrust that inhibits the emergence of effective institutional mechanisms that could facilitate regional cooperation. Moreover, the wave of hyper-nationalism in the Gulf region following the Arab Uprisings and assertions of identity that are attached to it further thwart regionalism, accentuating national differences that make it difficult to forge consensus between the six GCC member states.

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