1 Introduction
Debating Threat Perception

Iran is backing Assad. Gulf states are against Assad! Assad is against Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim Brotherhood and Obama are against General Sissi. But Gulf states are pro-Sissi! Which means they are against Muslim Brotherhood. Iran is pro-Hamas, but Hamas is backing Muslim Brotherhood! Obama is backing Muslim Brotherhood, yet Hamas is against the US! Gulf states are pro-US. But Turkey is with Gulf states against Assad; yet Turkey is pro-Muslim Brotherhood against General Sissi. And General Sissi is being backed by the Gulf states! Welcome to the Middle East and have a nice day.

K. N. Al-Sabah, *Financial Times*, 26 August 2013

This book examines a recurrent puzzle in the international relations of the Middle East. Leaders and regimes in the Middle East frequently make alliance decisions based on perception of threats emanating from both domestic and regional environments. When faced with both ideational and material sources of danger, regimes often diverge in their perceptions of what constitutes the most eminent threat. Whereas ideational forces shape leaders' threat perceptions in some cases, material forces override perceptions in other instances. This book addresses two questions: First, how do ideational and material forces shape regimes' threat perceptions? Second, why, and under which conditions, do ideational forces override material considerations in leaders' perception of threats, and vice versa?

On 22 September 1980, Saddam Hussein ordered the strike of air bases in Iran, thus launching the eight-year Iran–Iraq War. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, it became clear that the Ayatollahs were trying to export the revolution to Arab states of the Gulf. Though Saddam Hussein initiated the war, he obtained the support of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), North Yemen, Tunisia and Morocco. Even Egypt that Saddam Hussein isolated regionally following the peace treaty with Israel (1979)

supplied Iraq with Soviet military equipment. The support of Saddam Hussein in the Arab world was not unanimous, however. Syria and Libya gave military assistance to Iran in an attempt to balance Iraq's rising military ambitions in the region. This book focuses on the divergence in Arab leaders' alliance decisions based on the role of ideational and material forces in shaping their threat perceptions.

Throughout the 1970s, Iran and Iraq competed over hegemony in the Persian Gulf. Both countries transformed their military forces, thereby achieving a strategic parity where Iran was slightly superior. This balance of power was profoundly reversed by the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Viewing the army as Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah's most loyal institution, the Revolutionary Guards deliberately destroyed Iran's well-trained professional army, and hence altered the regional balance of power, ending Iran's regional supremacy. In the meantime, Saddam Hussein's regional military power increased significantly between 1975 and 1979, especially with a peak in the oil prices of 1973–74. Arab states, including Gulf states, were very much aware of Iran's declining military capabilities, as Ahmad Abdulaziz al-Jassim from the Kuwait Foreign Ministry pointed out:

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

Thus, it remains unclear why some Arab states consistently perceived a country ready to sell its air forces as a major source of danger, while Saddam Hussein's rising military ambitions were not perceived as such. An Arab collective regional balancing never materialised; instead, Arab states diverged in their perception of what constitutes the ultimate threat. Whereas Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan perceived the threat of the message emanating from the Islamic Revolution in a militarily weakened Iran as paramount, Syria most feared Iraq's rising military power. This divergence of Arab regimes over the two protagonists of the Gulf – Iraq and Iran – raises provocative puzzles with direct relevance for understanding the role of ideational and material sources of threats in leaders' perception and alliance decisions. Iraq's

military ambitions were a danger for all Arab regimes alike. Yet, they diverged in their perceptions of the regional balance of power. Similarly, the message of the Islamic Revolution that inspired resistance movements across the region constituted a challenge for all Arab regimes involved in supressing Islamic movements at home. The Gulf monarchies, Egypt, and Jordan, however, perceived such an ideational threat to be more pressing, whereas Syria and Libya considered Iraq's rising military power to be far more threatening. The apparent primacy of either ideational or material forces in states' threat perception constitutes one of the most intriguing puzzles for the study of threat perception in the international relations of the Middle East and beyond.

Syria and Saudi Arabia's divergence is particularly illustrative as both cases defy the existing literature on the role of ideational and material factors in the process of threat perception. Conventional neorealist approaches in International Relations (IR) argue that states sharing similar regional structures are likely to adopt converging foreign policies. Despite similar geographic proximity towards Iraq and convergent material interests in the stability in the Gulf, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and Lebanon, both Saudi Arabia and Syria differed in their reactions to Iran and Iraq.

In contrast to the assumption that identity convergence fosters cooperation, both Saudi Arabia and Syria perceived identity similarity as a source of fear. Despite the initial pan-Islamic message of the Islamic Revolution that conforms to the Saudi pan-Islamic identity narrative, Iran was perceived as more threatening than Iraq, a regime with a secular Ba'athist ideology. In that sense, Saudi Arabia, a monarchy that prides itself on its compliance with Islam, controverted the proper enactment of its pan-Islamic identity instead of embracing its principles; the pan-Islamic message of the revolution constituted the ultimate source of fear. In parallel, the Syrian regime, suppressing Islamist movements at home, allied with Iran against a seemingly like-minded secular Ba'athist regime in Iraq. This alliance violated the proper enactment of the regime's pan-Arab identity, according to which Arabs should unite against non-Arabs. In short, the Arab nationalist Syrian regime that championed a secular Ba'athist ideology supported non-Arab Iran – an Islamic regime bent on exporting its revolutionary theological doctrine – against a fellow Arab and Ba'athist regime in Iraq.

Furthermore, both cases challenge conventional wisdom on perceptual factors related to the effect of transnational ideologies and regimes' ultimate concern with domestic stability. This prerequisite for survival makes regimes more vulnerable towards revolutionary ideology aiming at destabilising their domestic rule. Although this argument explains the Saudi fear from the Islamic Revolution, the Syrian case poses a crucial challenge. Syria, a secular pan-Arab regime oppressing Islamist movements at home, should be equally threatened by the message of the Islamic Revolution. Yet, material considerations, such as the relative power distribution animated by Iraq's rising military ambitions, were prevalent in Syria's threat perception.

These puzzles raise questions with direct relevance to understanding the process of threat perception in the international relations of the Middle East and beyond. This book addresses the following primary question: Why, and under which conditions, do ideational forces dominate regimes' threat perception, and when do material forces override ideational ones in their perception of threat?

In the discipline of IR, threat perception has been a constituent element in the study of alliances.[1] Scholars studying the dynamics of alliance formation focus on two main phases in states' strategic calculus: (1) the perception or identification of a threat and (2) the decision about whether, and with whom, to ally in response to that perceived threat. Although threat perception has been amply studied within the alliance literature, the subject remains of the highest significance in terms of both theory development and policymaking. In academia, a widespread disagreement has dominated the debate on the factors that contribute to regimes' fear. Two explanatory camps stand out: one that identifies material factors as the primary driver in threat perception, and the other that privileges ideational forces. Together these two camps stake out the conceptual parameters of the study of alliance formation. This book sheds new lights on this debate by addressing the conditions that can explain when ideational forces will be predominant in states' fear of another and when material forces will be decisive.

On the one hand, realist scholars who have focused on material forces in shaping actors' threat perceptions have paid less attention

[1] I follow Walt (1987, 12) in defining an alliance as 'a formal or informal form of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states', but I extend the definition to include non-state actors.

to the role of ideational forces in this process. For example, Walt's (1987) neorealist-inspired balance-of-threat theory privileges material factors (aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities). Although Walt adds 'aggressive intentions' as a source of threats, ideational factors remain secondary in his theory. Ideational factors are mere instruments in the hand of leaders to justify their material interest-driven foreign policies. By focusing on material factors and giving ideational factors a secondary role, neorealism offers viable explanations for some cases, but it cannot adequately account for others. For example, if neorealist explanations can offer a viable explanation for the Syrian alliance based on the prevalence of material factors in the balance-of-threat logic, they fall short of answering why Saudi Arabia supported a militarily ambitious Iraq against a militarily weakened Iran.

On the other hand, scholars favouring ideational forces in their analysis have considered material forces to be epiphenomena. Barnett (1996, 1998) offers an alternative constructivist explanation of threat perception and alliance choices based on the politics of identity. In *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (1998), Barnett argues that rivalry among Arab states and failure to achieve unity schemes is due to the dispute over definitions of Arab identity. In his account, regimes are in constant struggle to maintain domestic stability and legitimacy. Therefore, symbolic disputes over identity will be the main source of threats. While Barnett's constructivist approach rightly complements Walt's neorealism by showing the independent role of ideational forces in threat perception, he fails to specify the conditions under which ideational and normative considerations will outweigh material ones, and when the opposite will hold.

Other scholars present corrective explanations of both realism and constructivism by showing how ideology plays a crucial role in threat perception (Gause 2003; Haas 2012; Rubin 2014). They argue that ideologically oriented regimes with limited power capabilities can present a greater threat than shifts in the balance of power. These works argue that military capabilities are not always the primary determinant of threat perception, and domestic perceptual variables related to the salience of regime survival often affect foreign policy behaviour. Accordingly, decisions makers perceive ideational factors that threaten domestic stability and regime survival as the ultimate source of danger. These crucial insights shed light on why many Arab

regimes felt threatened by the eruption of the Islamic Revolution despite Iran's declining military capabilities. Nevertheless, this scholarship does not account for the conditions under which such threat perception is triggered. The Syrian regime's threat perception was dominated instead by material considerations related to Iraq's rising military power. As is true for neorealism, ideational approaches offer invaluable insights for an elaborate understanding of alliance behaviour in the Middle East but remain insufficient in explaining the varying outcomes.

The modern Middle East abounds with examples demonstrating that dichotomised explanations, favouring either material or ideational forces, cannot account for some significant, yet apparently anomalous alliances in international relationship. Saudi and Syrian threat perceptions during subsequent regional wars raise similar questions about the role of ideational and material forces in threat perception and alliance decisions. The 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah constitutes another important episode. Although the war occurred between Israel and a non-state actor in Lebanon, its implications transcended the boundaries of the Lebanese–Israeli conflict and caused regional divisions. The Saudi Kingdom, conventionally portraying itself as the primary supporter of the cause against Israel, appeared to stand with Israel against a resistance movement. Consequently, it became puzzling why a non-state actor with limited capabilities – located, moreover, far from Saudi borders – was perceived as a threat. Meanwhile, Syria – a Ba'athist secular regime, oppressing Islamist movements at home – not only supported Hezbollah in order to balance Israel but also became more dependent on it for its survival.

Whereas some observers often depicted Saudi and Syrian alliances during the Iran–Iraq War and the 2006 Lebanon War in terms of sectarian affinities, with reference to the Sunni–Shiite divide in particular, the case of the 2009 Gaza War defies this sectarian lens; Hamas is an Islamic movement that finds its ideological origins in the Muslim Brotherhood belonging to a Sunni school of thought. Despite the identity convergence between Hamas and Saudi Arabia and their historical linkages related to the establishment of the group, the Kingdom perceived Hamas as a threat. Also, the Ba'ath regime, often depicted as Alawite (a strand of Shiism) in nature, perceived Hamas as an ally. The Gaza War provides uncontroversial evidence that threat perception is not driven by identity difference or sectarian divides. Whereas the Syrian regime oppressed the Muslim Brotherhood at

home,[2] they supported an offshoot branch of the same group at the regional level to balance Israel's military superiority.

The puzzle of threat perception is not only related to historical events in the Middle East. Recent events pertaining to international relationships in the region challenge traditional explanations of threat perception. For instance, Egypt, often depicted as one of the few nation-states in the Arab world with exceptional ethnic and cultural homogeneity, perceived non-state actors with limited material capabilities – namely Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza – as threats to Egypt's national interest. Meanwhile, Israel's military superiority is downplayed as a major source of threat in Egypt's official depictions of the regional balance of power. Furthermore, Iran, a geopolitically distant country, has constantly been identified as a threat to Egypt's national security (Rubin 2014, 98–100; Shama 2013, 111–52). Although Egypt has a predominantly Sunni population with exceptional ethnic homogeneity, the Sunni–Shiite debate has been instrumentally used to depict Iran as the most dangerous enemy during the Mubarak era but also during Mohamed Morsi's short-lived presidency (Saleh and Kraetzschmar 2015). Another example includes Saudi foreign policy towards Egypt following the 2011 Arab uprisings. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement with a Sunni background, to power in Egypt was identified as a source of threat to Saudi decision-makers, despite shared elements in identity and the decline in Egyptian material capabilities during the Brotherhood rule (Darwich 2016). These examples pose several controversies in explaining the role of ideational and material forces in states decision-makers' threat perception.

These cases are not only provocative episodes in Middle East history, but they also yield theoretical and analytical questions for the study of threat perception in IR. They show that both ideational and material forces are crucial in explaining threat perception, and explanations giving primacy for one over the other often obscures the process of threat perception and alliance decisions. Despite the

[2] At the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was inspired and hoped that the revolution in Iran would lead to a similar revolution in Syria to throw the al-Assad regime. This initial hope was followed by disappointment as the alliance and rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and the al-Assad regime became explicit. For more details on this episode, see Abd-Allah (1983, 179–87).

overwhelming importance of combining ideational and material forces in explaining Middle Eastern international relations, little consensus exists in either policymaking or academic circles around how and the conditions under which both ideational and material forces systematically shape processes of threat perception. This book attempts to unpack this often-overlooked phase and provides a comprehensive understanding of how and why some issues – rather than others – become the raw ingredients for leaders' perception of threats, which subsequently animate foreign policies. In what follows, I lay the foundations of the book by clarifying the broad outlines of the argument, why it matters, and how it contributes to the existing scholarship on threat perception in Middle East international relations.

Overview of the Argument

Leaders in the Middle East are in a relentless pursuit to preserve their regimes' survival, hinging upon both physical and identity security. They often face an unfavourable regional environment while fearing instability at home, what has been often termed as the 'logic of regime survival'. Leaders' perceptions in the Middle East are often at the origin of foreign policy decisions, and perceptions of threat are decisive in shaping states' conflictual and cooperative relationships with others. Furthermore, these perceptions are often transmitted and diffused to their societies through mass communication and media channels. The primary focus of this book is to examine the determinants of leaders' perceptions. In this regard, the major unit of analysis is the 'regime' (or leadership) rather than the 'state'. A closer look at the particularities of the state system in the Middle East reveals that statehood and sovereignty do not yet conform with the Westphalian notions of statehood.[3] Therefore, state power is often captured by a regime – a centralised authoritarian rule in the hands of a ruling elite or a leader – that absorbs state institutions.[4] Regimes (or leadership) are first and foremost concerned with their survival. They define what constitutes the 'national interest' and, hence, what constitutes a threat to it. In this context of states under formation and consolidation, the argument is

[3] For further details on the concept of sovereignty and statehood in the context of the Middle East, see Fawcett (2017) and Zartman (2017).
[4] For details about the basic components of regimes in the Middle East, see Owen (2012, chap. 3).

concerned with regimes' threat perception, often incarnated in their leaders or ruling elites.

In particular, I seek to explain why, and under which conditions, ideational forces create the ontological foundations for regimes' threat perceptions, and when material calculations override ideational constraints in periods of escalating tensions within and between states. My short answer is that both ideational and material forces are present in each process of threat perception. They interact, leading one or the other to become predominant in shaping the perception of threat. In some cases, leaders perceive ideational sources of threats as primary, while material sources of threats are of secondary importance. In other instances, material threats will evolve as the principal source of threats and ideational threats are perceived as secondary.

To explain the predominance of ideational or material factors in leaders' threat perception, two principal conditions are particularly relevant: the fluidity of regime identities and the range of policy options evolving from the relative power distribution. First, the fluidity of the regime identity relates to the likelihood of identity varying depending on the social context. States often hold multiple identities; different aspects of identity can become salient or likely to be activated in particular contexts. This fluidity of identity offers elites opportunities and constraints. Elites can choose aspects of their regime identity, attach new meanings to them, and use them as symbols to mobilise people. The degree of fluidity of identity is not similar across regimes. Some regimes can enjoy a higher degree of fluidity in their collective identity. In some societies, multiple identities co-exist, allowing the elites to activate and deactivate the various strands of identities. For example, Egypt has pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, Mediterranean, African and Egyptian nationalism strands of identities, providing the elites with relative flexibility in their foreign policy choices (Karawan 2002). In contrast, other states may be constrained by a fixed identity, where change and variation can put the cohesion of this collective entity at risk. For example, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states illustrate these cases where the national identity is weak and sub-national identities – namely tribal, sectarian, and ethnic identities – are predominant. In these cases, regimes rely on pan-Islamism as the common element across different societal groups to provide an overarching identity to keep the society together. Regimes have very little ability to manoeuvre in facing threats to this overarching identity. Regimes with this type of

fixed identity can perceive ideational threats as paramount due to their inability to activate other aspects of the threatened identity.

The second condition is the range of policy options evolving from the relative power distribution. Regimes often operate in an international environment, where the relative power distribution provides leaders with policy options to ensure the physical security of their regime. When faced with a military threat, leaders explore their options to ensure their physical survival. In some instances, the relative power distribution provides leaders with a clear structure where policy options are limited. In this situation, the structure leaves leaders with very little options in facing the threat. But, in other instance, regional and international structures do not come with clear prescriptions for leaders. In these situations, leaders are compelled to choose among multiple policy options to optimise their physical security.

Regimes facing various ideational and material sources of threats can diverge in their perceptions of which threat is more eminent based on the above two conditions. This book argues that when the distribution of military capabilities presents several policy options ensuring physical security but identity is fixed, leaders perceive threats to their identity as paramount. Hence, the predication of their identity narrative will dominate their perception of threat and will dictate the choice of the policy ensuring physical security. Material forces, on the other hand, are likely to dominate threat perception when identities are fluid and several identities co-exist and, in the meantime, the regimes face a distribution of military capabilities with limited policy options ensuring physical security. In this situation, leaders perceive threats to the regime's physical security as vital. Leaders perceive regime's identities as opportunities to reframe the narrative to conform to the exigencies of physical security.

This book differs from the previous literature in its characterisation of threat. Whereas previous work has dealt with threat perception as a discreet event that precedes alliance decisions, this book looks at threat perception as a process of interaction among regimes, between regimes and societies, and between regimes' material capabilities and identity narratives.[5] The book's argument, first, examines how both ideational and material forces shape regimes' fear. Second, it explores the conditions

[5] Similar conceptions of threat as a process can be found in Rubin (2014).