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The Ontological (In)security of Similarity:
Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy

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Abstract

It has long been argued that identity matters in international relations. Yet, how identity impacts enmity and conflict among states remains the subject of debate. The existing literature asserts that differences in identity can be a source of conflict, whereas convergence and similarity lead to cooperation. Nevertheless, empirical evidence from the Middle East has long defied this hypothesis. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which prides itself on being an Islamic model and claims Islamic leadership, has opposed the rise to power of Islamist movements in the Middle East. To address this paradox, this article builds on the growing literature on ontological security to propose a theoretical framework explaining how similarity can generate anxiety and identity risks. This framework, I argue, moves beyond traditional regime-security approaches to reveal that security is not only physical but also ontological. I then illustrate the argument through a comparison of Saudi identity risks in the wake of the Iranian revolution (1979) and the ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt (2012). Ultimately, these cases provide intriguing insights into foreign policy behaviour during critical situations.

Key words: ontological security, anxiety, identity, distinctiveness, similarity

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The Ontological (In)security of Similarity:
Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy[1]

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Article Outline

1 Introduction

It has long been argued that identity matters in international relations. Yet, how identity impacts enmity and conflict among states remains an issue of debate. The existing literature asserts that differences in identity and culture can be a source of conflict, whereas convergence and similarity can lead to cooperation (Huntington 1993, 1996; Horowitz 1995). Likewise, constructivists in international relations (IR) argue that states will identify positively with those with a similar identity (Wendt 1999). As Haas has argued, 'the greater the ideological

similarities among states' leaders, the more likely they will view one another's interests as complementary, and thus the greater the incentives pushing these individuals to form an alliance' (2003:36). Nevertheless, empirical evidence from the Middle East has long defied this hypothesis. As Walt observed in his study of alliances in the region, 'certain ideologies are more a source of division than of unity, even though the ideology explicitly prescribes close cooperation among the adherents' (1987:170). Pan-Islamism, which overtly aims to overcome national territorial differences and unify different entities in the region, has paradoxically been a source of fragmentation and division.[2]

This article extends upon, and goes beyond, the existing literature to argue that similarities in identity can be a source of conflict and enmity. Largely based on the adaptation of 'ontological security' to IR theory (McSweeney 1999; Steele 2005, 2008; Mitzen 2006), this article proposes a theoretical framework to explain how similarity can generate anxiety and identity risks. Building on the assumption that states have a basic need for ontological security, which refers to 'the need to experience oneself as a whole' (Mitzen 2006:342), I argue that security is enforced through a stable conception of self-identity. The essence of such a conception of self-identity is the distinctiveness of the self vis-à-vis the other. Accordingly, critical situations leading to the erosion of such distinctiveness trigger anxiety and insecurity, as the regimes' identities become equivocal. As a reactionary imperative, actors attempt to restore a secure self-identity through two mechanisms: counter-framing the other in a demonizing manner and reinventing a new self–other distinction. This argument is illustrated through a close comparative examination of Saudi foreign policy in 1979 and 2012.

Despite its pan-Islamic nature, the Islamic revolution in Iran was perceived as a threat to the Saudi Kingdom, a monarchy which itself asserted a broad pan-Islamic identity. This anti-Iranian stance was often couched in sectarian terms, with the kingdom defining its identity as 'Sunni' vis-à-vis a 'Shiite' other. Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its political offshoot the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt brought up several uncertainties within the Saudi royal elite, who could not hide their relief at the Brotherhood's quick downfall a year later. The Saudi reactions to the ascendance of this Sunni movement to power in Egypt went beyond the conventional sectarian polarization in the region to reveal a fundamental truth: the rise of any Islamic regime with a pan-Islamic vocation is a source of anxiety to the kingdom. This article addresses the resulting puzzle: why does Saudi Arabia, a monarchy that prides itself on its pan-Islamic identity and for ruling according to shari'a, oppose the rise of Islamist movements to power in the Middle East? Why and how can ideologically similar regimes be considered sources of identity risks?

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2   Other examples of identity similarity leading to divisions include the competition among pan-Arab nationalist regimes, cf. Barnett (1998). The rivalry between the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'thist regimes provides another illustration, cf. Kienle (1990).

This article largely moves beyond the regime-security-based approaches[3] as well as the sectarian accounts predominant in explanations of Saudi foreign policy to argue that the kingdom not only feels that its physical security is threatened but is also experiencing anxiety due to the similarity between its identity and that of other Islamic models. This is not to say that material power or internal threats to regime survival are insignificant. Rather, my study focuses on those rare moments in history where states' existential security is at risk. Therefore, I consider critical situations, such as wars and revolutions, as a scope condition for my argument. Looking at identity narratives at these particular moments provides an useful lens alongside other material explanations. Based on an ontological security interpretation, this article attempts to explain how the Islamic revolution in Iran and the rise of the MB in Egypt developed into a risk for the Saudi regime's identity. By comparing the Saudi foreign policy discourse towards Iran in 1979 with that towards the MB in 2012, I argue that in both cases the self-identity of the kingdom was threatened as its source of distinctiveness was eroded. Consequently, the kingdom responded with the two mechanisms noted above in order to restore its identity security: reinventing its regime identity to highlight its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the 'other', and demonising the other. In the case of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia streamlined its own identity from that of a champion of the pan-Islamist discourse to being the leader of the Sunni world. In the case of the MB, the kingdom further reduced its identity to portray itself as upholding a Salafi Wahhabi narrative, an offshoot of the Sunni tradition.

To explicate this argument, the article proceeds as follows: First, I examine the concept of ontological security and develop a theoretical framework to explain how similarity can generate identity risks. Second, I examine the case of the Iranian revolution and the threat it posed to the Saudi regime, and how the regime reduced its identity and reacted with a Sunni-versus-Shiite discourse. Third, I discuss the Saudi reaction to the rise of the MB in Egypt and how the kingdom narrowed its identity to Salafi Wahhabism to face this challenge.

2   Ontological (In)security: A Theoretical Framework

The emphasis on cultural and ideational factors as determinants of conflict and cooperation among states has emerged as a major trend in IR theory since the end of the Cold War. Huntington's (1993, 1996) famous argument about the clash of civilizations postulated that conflicts would erupt around cultural divides. He clearly claimed that '[i]n this new world order […] the most persuasive, important, and dangerous conflicts […] will […] be between peo-

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3   Based on the adaptation of the realist tradition to the context of Third World countries, regime-security approaches highlighted the role of domestic politics and legitimacy in regime behaviour (David 1991; Mufti 1996; Telhami 1999; e.g. Gause 2003; Curtis 2009).

ples belonging to different cultural entities' (1996:28). The explosion of ethnic conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia further fuelled this hypothesis. Some scholars not only drew correlations between identity difference and enmity but also considered difference to be a major driver of conflict. Horowitz (1995) contended that group differences, highlighted by the lack of common identity denominators, are a factor in ethnic conflicts. In the same vein, Saideman (2001) suggested that states get involved in ethnic conflict based on identity affinities; they intervene to support the side of the conflict with which their constituents share an ethnicity or ethnicities. Also, social constructivists in IR asserted that a sense of shared identity eliminates the perception of threat, which is in turn likely to increase the probability of interstate cooperation (Wendt 1999; Hopf 2002; Rousseau and Rocio 2007).

Despite the prevalence of the above literature, a few scholars opposed this trend, claiming that shared ties can be the most decisive in generating conflict and enmity. Axelrod (1997) suggested that convergence among individuals or groups can lead to division and divergence. The factors that create common identities – such as pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, or a European identity – can lead to an increased perception of difference. Based on a quantitative analysis, Gartzke and Gleditsch (2006) also found that conflict is more likely among culturally similar states than among culturally dissimilar ones.[4] Although these few attempts cast doubt on identity similarity as a source of cooperation only, our knowledge of why and how identity similarity can be a source of conflict among states is still very limited. This section thus develops a theoretical framework based on ontological security to address this gap.

Why does similarity threaten actors? Why do states need to assert a distinctive self-identity? The answer, I argue, lies in the intricate ontological-security need of states to have a distinctive and consistent sense of self and to have that sense affirmed by others. Some IR scholars have aimed to transfer the concept of 'ontological security', coined by the psychiatrist R.D. Laing and only recently introduced to IR theory, from the individual to the state level.[5] For Laing, an ontologically secure individual is one with a firm 'sense of integral selfhood and personal identity'. The concept was further developed in Giddens' structuration theory (1984, 1991). He defined ontological security as 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (1991:92). Such a sense of self is reflected in agents' behaviour. As Mitzen argues, 'ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action

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4   There is also a trend within the social identity perspective (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986) arguing that differentiation increases when group distinctiveness is low and threatened by similarity with other groups (Moghaddam and Stringer 1988; Roccas and Schwartz 1993; e.g. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Validzic 1998; Jetten, Spears, and Manstead 2001).

5   Cf. Zarakol (2010); Huysmans (1998); McSweeney (1999); Mitzen (2006); and Steele (2005, 2008).

and choice' (2006:344). In other words, agents choose a course of action that conforms to their self-identity.

Accordingly, and in contrast to realist accounts, where security and survival are achieved through the accumulation of military capabilities, actors also engage in ontological security–seeking behaviour, which provides them with 'a sense of continuity and order in events', to affirm their self-identity (Giddens 1991:243). Hence, ontological security involves the ability to 'experience oneself as a whole […] in order to realize a sense of agency' (Mitzen 2006:342). In other words, individuals need to feel secure in who they are, as they see themselves and as they want to be seen by others. As Giddens claims, 'to be ontologically secure is to possess […] answers to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way address-es' (Giddens 1991:47). This suggests that 'insecurity' means that individuals are confused about who they are and uncomfortable with their identity in social interactions with others (Steele 2005:525).

But how do states acquire this sense of self? Is it intrinsic? Scholars are divided on the sources of ontological security. On the one hand, Steele argues that ontological security is couched in a state's intrinsic narrative about the self. From this perspective, this sense of self enables the state to process its environment and build sustainable relationships with others. However, other scholars argue that a state's sense of self is based on social interaction with others. As Mitzen argues, the state's identity is 'constituted and sustained by social relation-ships rather than being intrinsic' (2006:354). In this regard, the sense of self is only reinforced and distinguished through sustainable interactions with others. According to Kinvall, 'inter-nalized self-notions can never be separated from self/other representations and are always responsive to new inter-personal relationships' (2004:749).

Barnett defines identity as 'the understanding of oneself in relationship to others' (1999:5). As identity refers to 'the image of individuality and distinctiveness (selfhood) held and projected by an actor' (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996:95), the sense of self only acquires meaning through the actor's differentiation and uniqueness from the other. In other words, identity is viewed as a line of distinctiveness which 'can only be established by dif-ference, by drawing a line between something and something else' (Nabers 2009:195). There-fore, I build on the sociological approach that sees ontological security as based on a con-sistent narrative of the self, which evolves through interaction with others. If self-identity is affirmed at the self-versus-other nexus, then ontological security is strongly linked to the idea of the distinctiveness of the self.

The distinctiveness of an actor's identity is reflected in that actor's behaviour and action, which consolidate his or her understanding of the self. Acquiring ontological security entails reproducing this self-versus-other distinctiveness and routinizing it. Such distinctiveness, though connected to the self–other relationship, becomes integral to the actor's self-identity and the maintenance of a consistent narrative, which contributes to the actor's ontological se-curity. As Mitzen suggested, 'inter-societal routines help maintain identity coherence for

each group, which in turn provides individuals with a measure of ontological security' (2006:352). In other words, states' ability to uphold a continuous distinctive identity vis-à-vis others influences the stability of state identity at the domestic level.

As continuity and order in routinized self-versus-other relationships are the main source of ontological security, 'critical situations' that alter these routines can pose risks to the sense of self and thus to identity. Giddens defined 'critical situations' as 'circumstances of a radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affect substantial numbers of individuals, situations that threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines' (1984:61). Because I have defined ontological security as the distinctive sense of self versus other, a 'critical situation' can be an external event leading to an altered representation of the other, which ultimately constitutes a source of instability and insecurity for the self. These events can include revolutions, wars, and regime changes. Such critical situations constitute the scope condition for this theoretical framework. As I discuss in more detail in the following section, the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) constituted a critical situation for the Saudis, as they perceived their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other to be altered. In other words, if the routinized relationship between the self and other is disturbed, the agent's sense of self is endangered. The change in circumstances threatens the individual's sense of identity by altering the social coordinates by which agents recognize their own identity and continuity. These unpredictable situations constitute an identity threat, as 'agents perceive that something can be done to eliminate them' (Steele 2008:12).
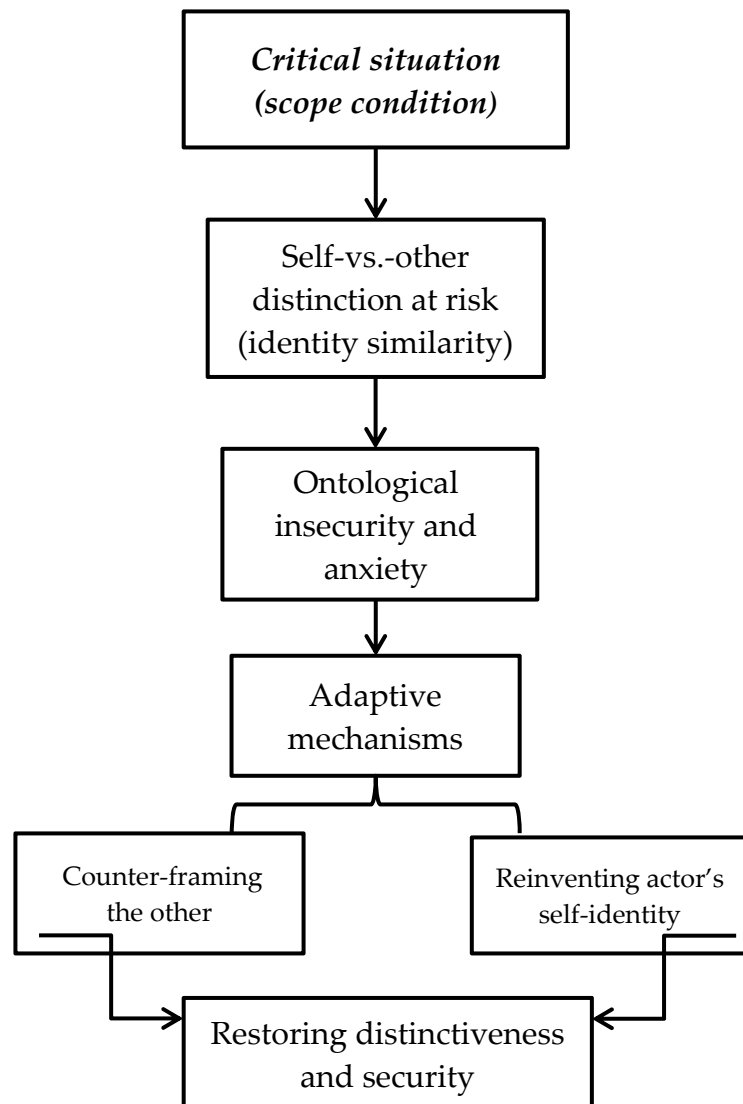
As the very basis of identity construction is differentiation and uniqueness from others, any disturbance in the self-versus-other distinction leads to agents' uncertainty about their own identity. Therefore, if the discursive constructions of the 'self' and the 'other' become increasingly similar, agents are ontologically insecure; they perceive the very basis of their self-identity to have been eliminated. From this perspective, and in contrast to the conventional wisdom that similar identities lead to convergence and cooperation, cultural and identity similarities can lead to differentiation and conflict. Based on social identity theory, Brewer (1991) also postulated that the need for distinctiveness is met through comparisons. Consequently, similarity constitutes a threat to one's need for differentiation or distinctiveness. As Currie notes, 'one's individuality is more threatened by similarity rather than difference' (2004:86). Therefore, similarity is a source of disturbance because the old and secure meaning of self and the associated sense of agency become irrelevant.

But what does 'identity similarity' mean? And is similarity always threatening? Absolute similarity, that is, sameness, is implausible. Therefore, by similarity I mean that actors share common beliefs about what constitutes their identity. It is worth noting that not all sorts of similarity must be threatening. Social identity scholars (Snyder and Fromkin 1980; Brewer 1991) postulate that low levels of similarity can foster cooperation, whereas high levels of similarity can lead to the opposite. In this regard, actors are motivated to find an optimal balance between assimilation with and differentiation from others. Similarity, I argue here,

becomes threatening if it extends to that particular line of distinctiveness without which the actor's *raison d'être* is meaningless. Henceforth, this lack of distinctiveness will trigger *anxiety*, which Giddens distinguishes from *fear*. Whereas fear is 'a response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite objective', anxiety is 'a generalized state of emotions' (Giddens 1991:43). In other words, fear is a reaction to an objective material threat to the agent's survival. Anxiety, however, is a sense of insecurity that emerges when the agent's self-identity is challenged. From this perspective, anxiety causes a state of ontological insecurity that is not based on a specific objectified threat, as it attacks the 'core of the self once a basic security system is set up' (Giddens 1991:44).

When their sense of self-identity is threatened through this similarity, actors will counter their anxiety with a dynamic adaptive reaction. To enhance their ontological security, actors are continuously monitoring their own behaviour, which reflects their ideas about their self-identity. Therefore, when critical situations alter the established self–other distinction, agents feel uncomfortable with who they are and their routines are unable to accommodate the new circumstances. Consequently, agents change their behaviour to conform to their new sense of self.

As these new circumstances create similarity, agents adopt an imperative reactionary behaviour to restore clear waters between them and the other, what Freud (1922) referred to as 'the narcissism of small differences'. Two main adaptive strategies can be discerned. Firstly, actors tend to frame the other in a demonizing way to legitimize their own identity. As illustrated in the following sections, Saudi Arabia has tended to frame the Islamic revolution in Iran and the MB in Egypt as unfaithful and deviating from the true path of Islam. Secondly, actors are likely to bolster the old self–other distinction and seek to generate a new and secure identity. Actors reinvent relationships with others by fostering new differences and distinctions in the discourse of their identity (Bloom 1990:39–40). The Saudis thus reinvented their self-identity, moving from pan-Islamism to Sunni Islam, to highlight a new distinction vis-à-vis the Iranian revolution – that is, Sunni versus Shiite. With the MB's ascendance, the Saudi Kingdom further streamlined its identity, moving from a broadly Sunni narrative to a narrow Salafi Wahhabi discourse – an offshoot of the Sunni tradition – and thereby excluding the MB and any other Sunni group.

Figure 1: Restoring Ontological Security


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              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │   Critical situation     │
              │    (scope condition)     │
              └─────────────────────────┘
                          │
                          ▼
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │     Self-vs.-other       │
              │   distinction at risk    │
              │   (identity similarity)  │
              └─────────────────────────┘
                          │
                          ▼
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │      Ontological         │
              │    insecurity and        │
              │        anxiety           │
              └─────────────────────────┘
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                          ▼
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │       Adaptive           │
              │     mechanisms           │
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Counter-framing the other

Reinventing actor's self-identity

Restoring distinctiveness and security

Source: Author's own compilation.

The remainder of this article uses the case of Saudi foreign policy to demonstrate how identity similarity can generate anxiety. With the rise of Islamist movements to power, the Saudi regime feared the erosion of its identity. The following two sections explore Saudi anxiety regarding the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. Such an empirical comparison, I argue, offers an extremely useful opportunity to assess the validity of the above theoretical framework. These case studies illustrate the preliminary validity of the main argument: identity similarity can be a source of anxiety. In addition, they shed light on the relevance of the theoretical proposition and probe its plausibility for theory building.[6]

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6   Plausibility probe cases are 'attempts to determine whether potential validity may reasonably be considered great enough to warrant the pains and costs of testing' (Eckstein 2000:140–141).

3   An Ontological Security Interpretation of Saudi Foreign Policy

Before examining the Saudi Kingdom's behaviour, I will briefly explore what 'Saudi state identity' means. As opposed to Arab states, where nationalism was based on ethnic elements, such as Arabism, combined with territorial affinities related to the struggle against colonialism, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not formed on the basis of a 'national' identity.[7] Modern Saudi Arabia came into existence as a result of the Al Saud's attempt to establish an Islamic monarchy on the Arabian Peninsula. The unification of the Arabian Peninsula was an outcome of the long-standing alliance between Muhammed Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (the eponym of Wahhabism)[8] and the Al Saud. The new state lacked a national identity that could stand in contrast to the patriotism developing in the neighbouring Arab states.[9] The Saudi state identity thus came to be based on an appropriation of Islamic symbols: 'our constitution is the Quran and the application of shari'a'. Islam, and its Wahhabi interpretation in particular,[10] enabled the regime to distinguish itself from other regional actors.[11] As Nevo stated, 'religion has played a prominent role not only in moulding the individual's private and collective identities but also in consolidating [the] national values' (1998:35).[12] According to a survey conducted in 2003, Saudis consider religion the most important element of their identity; territorial nationalism comes second (Thompson 2014:233).

Since Saudi Arabia has two of the three holy cities of Islam within its borders – Mecca and Medina – Islam served as a source of its distinctiveness from other states in the region. For decades, the kingdom relied on Islam to provide it with a unique identity in the region, separate from the secular pan-Arab wave that swept the region during the 1950s and 1960s under the charismatic leadership of Egyptian president Nasser (Piscatori 1983). In an attempt

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7   The nature of the Saudi society – composed of diverse clans, tribes, and Bedouins – did not allow the emergence of a state around a collective national identity. The Arabian Peninsula was rarely unified until the forces of the Saud family succeeded in unifying the country in the early twentieth century (Kostiner 1990).

8   Wahhabism refers to the Saudi variant of the Sunni tradition. The word 'Wahhabism' is derived from the teachings of the Muslim scholar, Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, who lived on the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century (1703–1792). Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab founded a religious movement that aimed to reverse what he perceived as the moral decline of the Islamic society on the Arabian Peninsula. Based on an alliance between Muhammed Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammed Ibn Saud, the founder of the first Saudi state, Wahhabism provided the ruling family with legitimacy and a powerful tool to unite various tribes and regions under it. It is worth nothing that the term Wahhabism is a pejorative term. The Wahhabis call themselves *Muwahidun* (monotheists). Despite the imperfection of the term 'Wahhabism', I retain it, as it is widely used.

9   On the lack of a national Saudi identity, see the article of the leading Saudi columnist Hamid Al-Din (2014).

10 Despite the presence of diverse groups with different interpretations of Islam within the Kingdom, the public discourse is dominated by the exclusive interpretation of Islam.

11 This does not mean that the state identity was an amalgamation of diverse groups in the society. Instead, the Al Saud monopolized the state's identity narrative, which derived from Wahhabism.

12 For further details on the role of Wahhabism in the formation of the Saudi state, cf. Ayoob and Kosebalaban (2008).

to discredit pan-Arabism, the kingdom emphasized the imagery of the pan-Islamic *umma*[13] and crowned itself the defender of faith in the region. This pan-Islamic narrative, which prescribed solidarity among Muslims, was often identified by King Faisal (1964–1975) as the inherent *raison d'être* of the Saudi state (Sindi 1986). With the demise of the pan-Arab project,[14] the pan-Islamic discourse gained leverage among the Arab masses. Saudi Arabia portrayed itself as the representative of the Muslim world and prided itself on being the only Islamic state to rule according to shari'a.

Ironically, its claim to be the protagonist of 'true' Islam in the world sowed the seeds of the Saudi state's ultimate vulnerability to other emerging Islamic models in the region. Any possibility of a neighbouring state adopting an interpretation of Islam similar to the Saudi version constituted a critical threat to the state's uniqueness and distinctiveness. This type of threat emerged once Islamist movements achieved power in the region. In 1979, the kingdom feared that it would lose its unique Islamic credentials when the Islamic revolution in Iran adopted a pan-Islamic identity similar to that of the Saudis. The distinction according to which the kingdom had consolidated its identity vis-à-vis the other states in the region became irrelevant. Seeking to re-establish its uniqueness, the Saudi state narrowed its regime identity from pan-Islamism to Sunni Islam. Based on this Sunni version of Islam, Iran was identified as a Shiite 'other'.

Decades later, the ascendance of the MB to power in Egypt in 2012 constituted another acute challenge. The kingdom had been successful in re-establishing its distinctiveness following the Iranian revolution by making a sectarian distinction, but the MB belonged to the Sunni interpretation of Islam. To adapt to this new situation, the kingdom thus adopted a narrow Salafi Wahhabi interpretation of Islam vis-à-vis the MB's Islamic Sunni discourse.

Figure 2: The Saudi Identity-Reframing Process
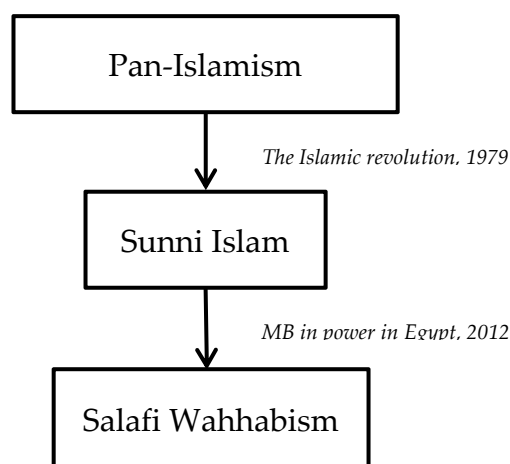
Source: Author's own compilation.

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13 *Umma* is used to refer to all Muslims as one community bound by religion.

14 Pan-Arabism refers to the political project of unifying all Arabs under a single state.

3.1 The Islamic Revolution and the Security of Sectarianism

When Saudi Arabia had consolidated its distinct identity as the sole Islamic model in the region, the Islamic revolution broke out in Iran in 1979, thereby undermining the Saudis' self-identity by altering the representation of the 'other'. The Islamic revolution downplayed Persian nationalism and promoted Islamic universalism. The revolution aimed to transcend its national context, and called for Muslim unity and solidarity (Buchta 2002). The new identity of the Islamic Republic portrayed Iran as the vanguard of revolutionary and anti-imperialist Islam and the legitimate leader of the Muslim *umma*. It thus explicitly converged with the Saudi worldview, which was based on solidarity among Muslims.

According to Khomeini, Muslims formed a single community (*umma*), and the existing borders were the result of imperialism and domination. He argued that Islam was one, and that Muslims should henceforth unite: 'Muslims must become a single hand. They must become a united hand, remain united, become one; they must not think themselves separate from us' (quoted in Halliday 2002:31). This claim remained a core concern for Iran and was reflected in the constitution, which proclaimed solidarity among Muslims. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic pursued a foreign policy strategy that appealed to Arabs and Muslims. Iran constantly emphasized its commitment to the Palestinian cause. At the height of the Second Intifada (2000), Supreme Leader Khamenei termed Palestine 'a limb of our body' (Wehrey, Karasik, Nader, Ghez, Hansell, and Guffey 2009:23). This pan-Islamist narrative was accompanied by increasing financial support to Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranians thus presented themselves as the leader of Islam in the region and the epitome of virtue in the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Pan-Islamism should have served as a common denominator between the Iranian Republic and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ironically, its implications were divisive. The kingdom saw the foundations of its state identity eroded. Turki al-Faisal Al Saud[15] has offered an interesting perspective on the kind of risks Iran posed to the kingdom:

> Saudi Arabia is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,[16] and the Birthplace of Islam, and as such it is the eminent leader of the wider Muslim world. Iran portrays itself as the leader not just of the minority Shiite world, but of all Muslim revolutionaries interested in standing up to the West. (Al Saud 2013:38)

The distinctiveness the Saudi state claimed to have in relation to other actors was endangered by the rise of a pan-Islamist ideology in Iran. The perceived danger was magnified by the Iranian revolution's efforts to discredit the Saudi version of Islam. A Saudi official explicated this tension as follows: 'Iran's biggest struggle is with Saudi Arabia, not with the Unit-

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15 Turki al-Faisal is a member of the Saudi royal family. From 1977 to 2001, Prince Turki was the director of *al-mukhābarāt al 'aāma* (the Saudi general intelligence service).

16 This title was introduced in 1986 in reaction to Iranian demands to place Mecca and Medina under international rule.

ed States. Iran wants to challenge the Saudi version of Islam, that is the division of politics and religion' (quoted in Marschall 2003:48). Accordingly, the Saudi regime came under pressure. Another element of the pan-Islamic rhetoric consisted of challenges to the monarchic and hereditary principles of the Saudi regime.

This challenge to the distinctiveness of Saudi identity was exacerbated by other material and domestic threats to the kingdom in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. The Shiites in the eastern province of the Saudi Kingdom staged protests on 28 November 1979. The regime claimed that its small Shiite community, estimated at approximately 350,000 in 1986, was beholden to Iranian influence (Goldberg 1986:230). There is no compelling evidence that Iran was involved in Saudi internal affairs. Nevertheless, a small number of Shiite clerics in Saudi Arabia were inspired by Khomeini's speeches, especially his aim to export the Islamic revolution (Ibrahim 2006). This domestic challenge put further pressure upon the regime, as it exposed and magnified the lapses in its identity narrative.

These circumstances drove the Saudi rulers to reinvent their state's identity, which they needed to separate from the generic pan-Islamic rhetoric in order to re-establish a sense of self vis-à-vis the changing representation of the 'other' – namely, Iran. The Saudis narrowed their identity to the Sunni approach, known for its rejection of the Shiites as a legitimate Islamic community. In looking to distinguish the Saudi version of Islam from the Iranian one, the kingdom thus reinvigorated a sectarian discourse. Sunni Islam was broadly introduced into Saudi foreign policy not as a source of legitimacy but as a component of Saudi national identity that tied the rule of the Al Saud to the state and the territory and distinguished Saudi Arabia from the Islamic Republic.

The reduction of the Saudi pan-Islamic identity to a Sunni Islamic one created a new self-versus-other distinctiveness couched in sectarian terms (Sunni versus Shiite). Henceforth, the kingdom adopted an anti-Shiite discourse designed to discredit the pan-Islamic narrative of the Iranian revolution. For this endeavour, the regime strengthened the power of the *ulama* (as representatives of the state religion) and promoted the kingdom's conservative Sunni image. It also reinforced a stricter Wahhabi code of conduct, granting the *ulama*, such as Ibn Bāz,[17] more control over social and religious life (Steinberg 2005:28–29). This was manifested in the strengthening of the religious strands in the educational system, which resulted in the state becoming closely associated not only with Islamic symbols but also with a Sunni approach that rejected Shiite symbols (Niblock 2006:55). Moreover, the kingdom's rulers aimed to consolidate the kingdom's image as the eminent leader of the Muslim world by using the title of 'the custodian of the two holy sites' – Mecca and Medina.

In addition to creating this new distinction, the kingdom counter-framed the Islamic Republic to demonize the latter's claims. The Saudi clerical establishment produced an over-

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17 Ibn Bāz was one of the most prestigious Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia. He was the grand mufti for the kingdom from 1993 until his death in 1999.

flow of anti-Shiite publications to blunt the pan-Islamic appeal of the Islamic revolution.[18] Sectarian language became more explicit. From the perspective of the Sunni *ulamas*, the Shiite propensity for saint worship, shrine and grave cults, and veneration of imams were abhorrent acts of polytheism (*shirk*). Indeed, Sunni scholars viewed Shiites as 'the incarnation of infidelity, and [...] polytheists', making it the duty of believers 'to manifest enmity to the polytheists [who] were perceived as unbelievers (*kufar*), and were therefore liable to the severest sanctions, including that of holy war (jihad)' (Goldberg 1986:232). In short, this Saudi counter-framing of Shi'ism placed the Iranian regime outside of the Muslim community, describing them as defectors (*rafidda*).

Based on this identity consolidation, the representation of the 'Saudi-Sunni self' was contrasted with the 'Iranian-Shiite other' in Saudi foreign policy. The discourse of exclusion, based on religious otherness and framed by a religious narrative, highlighted Saudi Arabia's religious uniqueness, which was necessary to forge a distinct regime-identity narrative. In other words, sectarianism was simply a strategy for re-establishing the kingdom's distinctiveness and, thus, its ontological security.

3.2   The Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood: Increasing Similarity and Increasing Insecurity

Following the Islamic revolution, the kingdom prided itself on representing Sunni Islam against its enemies from the Shiite sect. Although this distinction provided the kingdom with a secure sense of self for decades, it was challenged by the critical situation created by the 2011 Arab uprisings, which swept the Arab world, toppled dictators, and opened the doors of power to Islamist movements. Most importantly, the ascendance of the MB to power in Egypt, with the first elected Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, was a key development at the regional level.

The MB represented a Sunni approach similar to the kingdom's reframed identity narrative, as explicitly acknowledged by an old fatwa from the Standing Committee for Scholarly Research and Fatwas[19] in the kingdom:

> The closest of all Islamic groups to the Truth and the keenest to apply it: *Ahl-ul-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* (adherents to the *Sunnah* and the Muslim mainstreams). They are *Ahl Al-Hadith* (the scholars of Hadith), *Ansar Al-Sunnah* group, and then *Al-Ikhwan-ul-Muslimun* (the MB). (Standing Committee 2014)

Despite this convergence, the ascendance of the MB to power was a source of anxiety for the kingdom, as the latter's distinct representation of itself as the sole leader of the Sunni Islamic

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18   For an overview, cf. Algar (2002).

19   This is an Islamic committee established by the king that issues rulings in Islamic jurisprudence. The members are drawn from the Council of Senior 'Ulama. The members of this council are appointed by the king and usually reflect state interests. For an overview of the dynamics between the *ulama* and the regime, cf. Boucek (2010).

world was called into question. This section examines the similarity between the MB's identity and that of the Saudi state, and how this similarity created discomfort for the Al Saud. I subsequently examine how the kingdom reacted in order to re-establish its ontological security.

Although the ideological foundations of the MB were initially different from those of Saudi Arabia, the group underwent drastic internal ideological changes over the decades. It increasingly embraced Salafi ideas, thereby moving into the same ideological paradigm as the Saudis. During the 1970s, the MB underwent what Tammam (2011) called 'Salafization', becoming a Salafi entity. This transformation started with the group's interaction with the Saudi Kingdom following the oppression exercised upon it by Nasser's regime in the 1950s. The majority of the Muslim Brothers who fled the country found refuge in Saudi Arabia, where they were actively engaged in the social and economic modernization of the kingdom, under the reign of King Faisal. Through protracted exposure to the Saudi environment, the members of the group gradually embraced Wahhabi ideas, which became integral to the group's ideology (Tammam 2008). When the MB reconvened its activity in Egypt in the 1970s, the ideological fusion between the Brotherhood's initial approach and Salafism was apparent. The Salafi–Brotherhood intermarriage manifested in the group's intolerance toward other Islamic and non-Islamic groups, such as the Copts.[20] This trend was also manifested in the perceived necessity of applying shari'a. These positions clearly demonstrated that the Salafi discourse was becoming the dominant ideology within the group. Moreover, many Brotherhood sheikhs adopted the Salafi clothing and temperament, and a generation of '*salafized*' preachers emerged within the group.[21]

These changes in the Brotherhood's approach made the group ideologically and intellectually more convergent with the Saudi interpretation of Islam. The MB's ideology became even more concrete with the group's rise following Mubarak's downfall in February 2011. Salafi Islamic values provided the source of identity in Brotherhood-led Egypt. During his electoral campaign, Mohamed Morsi emphasized the group's adherence to Salafism:

> The Koran is our constitution, the Prophet Muhammad is our leader, jihad is our path, and death for the sake of Allah is our most lofty aspiration [...] shari'a, shari'a, and then finally shari'a. This nation will enjoy blessing and revival only through the Islamic shari'a. (Morsi 2012)

If the kingdom claimed to represent the Sunni Islamic world, with a king portraying himself as protector of the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina, an Islamist-led Egypt undermined the main credentials of the Saudi identity.[22] The kingdom was no longer the sole Sunni mod-

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20 For an overview of the question of the MB and the Copts, cf. Tadros (2012:chap. 5).

21 For more details on this development, see the autobiography of Abdul Moneim Abu Al-Futuh (2012) and an interview with a former member of the MB (Al-Kharbawy 2012).

22 Similar identity-related debates emerged in relation to the AKP leadership in Turkey (Ennis and Momani 2013) as well as Saudi–Qatari competition (Dorsey 2013).

el in the region (Al-Rasheed 2013). In other words, the very existence of the Saudi state was at stake as its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other was being eroded. Since ontological security is the security of being, actors can feel uncomfortable if their relations with others are disrupted. With the rise of the MB, the uniqueness of the Saudi identity as the leader of Sunni world was disrupted. In other words, the kingdom found itself in a new, critical situation that generated insecurity.

The rise of the MB not only eroded the distinctiveness of the kingdom's identity at the regional level, but it also became a potential threat at the domestic level as it inspired contentious voices within the kingdom. It led to discussions that questioned Saudi religious theory – the foundation of the kingdom's identity. Dissenters questioned the contradictions within this theory, especially regarding the political aspects, such as individual constitutional rights.[23] These debates were initiated most explicitly by the leaders of the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya movement (the Islamic Awakening),[24] a group that had played a crucial role in legitimizing the policies of the Al Saud, especially those against al-Qaeda, in the first decade of the century. It is worth nothing that these critics did not question the legitimacy of Al Saud.[25] In contrast, they appealed to the ability of the ruling family, and only the ruling family, to initiate reforms. In other words, these discussions did not endanger the physical security of the regime, but rather its existential ontological security.

Given these circumstances, the kingdom needed to reframe its identity. Whereas the kingdom had reinvented its identity vis-à-vis the Islamic revolution in Iran by narrowing its Islamic identity to a purely Sunni version, re-establishing identity security in 2012 was more challenging. While forging this new distinction by narrowing its own identity narrative, the kingdom went on discrediting the MB, or the new 'other'. It used several mechanisms to do so.

First, the kingdom sought to discredit the MB's identity as a 'true' Salafi group. The Saudi religious establishment denied the Salafi nature of the group, especially in the regime-influenced media outlets. In a local newspaper, *Al-Madina*, leading Saudi sheikhs pronounced fatwas claiming that the MB had 'no Salafi roots'. In response to the question of whether the MB belonged to the 72 groups in Islam that had gone astray, Sheikh Salih bin-Fawzan al-Fawzan, a senior member of the Ifta Committee, stated, 'yes, everyone who violates *ahl-Sunna wa al-Jama'a* in Islam in da'wa or doctrine or any of the faith pillars belongs to the 72 groups'. Sheikh Muhammed bin al-Laydan, a member of the Council of Senior Schol-

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23 For example, see the petition to King Abdullah by al-Sahwa movement leaders entitled 'A Call for Reform' (A Call for Reform 2011), and 'An Open Letter' to the king published by Salman Al-Awda in March 2013 (Al-Awda 2013).

24 Al-Sahwa is one of the most important reformist movements in the kingdom. It is a heterogeneous group, far from united, combining the Wahhabi religious-cultural core with strong reformist tendencies and selective elements of the MB methodology. For more details, cf. Lacroix (2011) and Fandy (2001).

25 It is noteworthy that none of the Sahwa leaders supported the demonstrations in Riyadh on 11 March 2011 following the Arab uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia (Lacroix 2014).

ars, claimed, 'the Brotherhood […] are not from the truthful Islamic schools of thought and its name has no origin in the *Salaf* predecessors' (Al-Sayali 2013).

Second, the kingdom portrayed itself as the guardian of moderate Islam against the MB, which was accused of 'pragmatism' and, thus, faithlessness. During Morsi's rise to power and until he was removed from power, the regime-influenced media portrayed the MB as 'unfaithful' and accused it of using religion as an instrument. This portrayal was often exemplified by the long history of the group and its relationship to the Al Saud. The MB was depicted as an unfaithful organization that did not acknowledge the help and support provided to it by the Al Saud (Al-Utaybi 2011).[26] In this vein, the Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Da'wa, and Guidance, Salih bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Sheikh, stated that the MB was known for 'hypocrisy', as its behaviour was driven by interests instead of 'faith'. This narrative was best exemplified in the series of six articles published by *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and entitled 'The Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia: The Entire Story'. These articles portrayed the group as treacherous and unfaithful (Anonymous 2014).

Third, the kingdom distinguished itself as the leader of 'moderate' Sunni Islam, in contrast to the supposed 'radical and fundamental' nature of the MB. When the new regime in Egypt massacred Brotherhood protestors in August 2013, King Abdullah uncharacteristically voiced his public support for the military intervention:

> Let the entire world know that the people and government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stood and still stand today with our brothers in Egypt against terrorism, extremism and sedition, and against whomever is trying to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs. (King Abdullah Al Saud 2013)

When the new Egyptian government declared the MB a terrorist organization in December 2013, Saudi Arabia followed suit. On 7 March 2014, a Saudi Interior Ministry statement pronounced the MB, along with other groups, including al-Qaeda in Yemen and Iraq, a terrorist group (BBC 2014). Since then, the regime narrative has portrayed the MB as intrinsically violent.

In a word, in order to restore its identity security, the kingdom aimed to forge a new, distinctive identity narrative, not only as the sole leader of Sunni Islam in the region, but also as the upholder of a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. It also portrayed the MB as unfaithful, treacherous, and radical. In this way, the Saudi royal elite was able to maintain a seemingly coherent and distinct identity, and was thus able to restore its identity security.

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26 Since Egyptian president Nasser's rule in the 1950s and 1960s, the Saudi royal family had offered support and assistance to the members of the MB. This assistance took the form of political asylum for members of the group fleeing the crackdown of the Egyptian regime. It also included funding for the creation of Islamic charities that served not only the Wahhabi religious doctrine but also the MB (Mourad 2013).

4 Conclusion

Similarities in identity can both unite and divide. In this article, I have developed a theoretical framework to explain how such similarities can cause cleavages and be a source of anxiety. In the case of Saudi foreign policy, I have found that similarity became particularly threatening as the distinctiveness of the Saudi identity was challenged. The distinctiveness of the kingdom was based on two exclusive identity narratives, which portrayed Saudi Arabia, first, as the sole and legitimate leader of Islam, until 1979, and then, subsequently, of Sunni Islam, until 2012. These narratives provide intriguing insights into foreign policy conduct in critical situations, when states' existential security is at stake.

Ontological security approaches provide a novel theoretical entry point for the study of Middle Eastern countries' foreign policy. They supplement realist assumptions about regimes' physical security with the consideration of ontological-security needs, which can explain how the emergence of a similar identity can cause a state anxiety. The framework developed here may shed additional light on recent developments in the region – for example, Saudi fears resulting from the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (cf. Dorsey 2014). Also, an ontological security approach shows that the seemingly sectarian divisions of the region can be understood differently. Predominantly sectarian explanations consider identity difference to be the driving force behind conflict. Ontological security approaches suggest a different starting point – that is, that states have a stake in maintaining these sectarian divisions to fulfil ontological-security needs. By demonstrating ontological security's usefulness in explaining rare moments in history, this paper yields implications beyond the context of the Middle East. Ontological security approaches might also illuminate cases where revolutions and the diffusion of democratic waves threaten the existential security of authoritarian regimes (cf. Gunitsky 2014).

Ultimately, this argument makes important contributions to IR theory. While there is some recognition that identity similarity drives cooperation, this examination of the Saudi case has probed the plausibility of identity similarity as a source of conflict, a proposition which invites theory building and testing to confirm such a hypothesis. The discussion has also contributed to our understanding of how similarity can be threatening, and how identity is framed and reframed. In its quest for distinctiveness, the kingdom has constantly highlighted its differences vis-à-vis the other, reducing its identity narrative from pan-Islamism to Sunni Islam and then to Salafi Wahhabism as a result. This suggests that future research should examine how differences are framed, and how states choose among various sources of distinctiveness. As Bateson has said, 'the number of potential differences [...] is infinite but very few become effective differences [...] that make a difference' (1979:98).

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