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Gulf States and Peacebuilding: Key Characteristics, Dynamics, and Opportunities

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While the Gulf States have long been generous providers of foreign aid, it is only in recent years that they have publicly committed to playing a major role as peacebuilders. This paper analyzes the current role and prospects of the Gulf States as actors in the field of peacebuilding.

This change in direction towards engaging in peacebuilding is rooted in several factors. Firstly, over the past twenty years, conflict has edged ever closer to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, in addition to major unrest in Bahrain. This entails that managing the dynamics of peace and conflict in their neighborhood is important for ensuring national security. Secondly, there is major competition between the Gulf States to be seen as international players. Finally, there is a big shift in psychology. These once reclusive societies now like to display wealth and be seen as doing the right thing on the global stage—which they increasingly express through a stated commitment to peacebuilding.

This growing commitment of the Gulf States offers an opportunity for better peacebuilding financing, which is heavily dependent on a small group of donors: Germany, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK. This dependence means that funding is vulnerable to policy shifts in these states. A recent report argues that given this and the changing context of COVID-19, “Peacebuilding will need new champions and more diversity in political, policy and financial terms.”¹ This emerging need could involve a wide range of peacebuilding partners, including research institutes, think tanks, the private sector, and philanthropists. This paper explores the role that the Gulf States currently play as peacebuilding actors and their potential to emerge as transformational champions for peacebuilding.

Over the past few decades, the Gulf States have emerged as major humanitarian and development donors globally. Since the Gulf States are wealthy oil- and gas-rich monarchies with high levels of stability, the international aid system has increasingly drawn on their generous donations, especially amidst the rising

¹ Pauline Vernon and Andrew Sherriff, “International Funding for Peacebuilding: Will COVID-19 Change or Reinforce Existing Trends?” (ECDPM, September 28, 2020), <https://ecdpm.org/publications/international-funding-peacebuilding-covid-19-change-reinforce-existing-trends/>.

struggle to raise funds in the wake of several major crises such as the 2008 financial crash and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the global financial and economic crisis, the Gulf States—specifically Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—expanded their humanitarian and developmental assistance by 50 percent in real terms. Official Development Assistance (ODA) increased by two-thirds from 2008 to 2011 compared to the four years preceding the crisis. Total commitments rose from \$4.6 billion in 2007 to reach an all-time high of \$8.5 billion in 2012. Three international and regional institutions provided the bulk of assistance during 2008 to 2012: the Islamic Development Bank (37 percent), the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (19 percent), and the OPEC Fund for International Development (11 percent). Among national funds, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development contributed the most (11 percent).²

In comparison, the Gulf States' humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic also increased. The UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia all pledged \$10 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) to support the search for testing equipment, treatments, and a vaccine for the coronavirus. However, in terms of ODA, Saudi Arabia's contribution decreased 25.3 percent during 2020 to \$1.5 billion, and Qatar decreased 31.3 percent to \$88.6 million, while Kuwait increased its ODA contribution by 33 percent to \$1.35 billion³.

While the Gulf States exhibit some comparative advantages as potential peacebuilding champions, as donors they face major challenges adopting such a role. These challenges are interconnected and increasingly multidimensional. For example, some of the barriers to Gulf States leading as regional peacebuilders include the persistence of conflict that has led to high economic, social, human, and political costs for the region. This has raised further implementation challenges, as the region has failed to reach a clear post-conflict condition that facilitates sustainable recovery and peacebuilding. Furthermore, the shifting geopolitical dynamics limits Gulf States' ability to exert influence on the ground. Lastly, national biases or misunderstandings of local dynamics hinder the Gulf States' ability to contribute to effective peacebuilding.

Pursuing narrow interests or competitive policies also leads to further hindrances to peacebuilding initiatives. The “crisis of expertise” within the international policymaking arena has removed Gulf donors from the local complexities of the conflict. As a result, they cannot rely on a sustained relationship with civil society actors whose experiences are vital to peace. Additionally, issues of inequality pertaining to ongoing conflicts, sectarianism,

² Rouis, Mustapha. “Response of the Arab Donors to the Global Financial Crisis and the Arab Spring,” MENA knowledge and learning quick notes series; no. 112 (World Bank, 2013); <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/20556>.

³ Casado-Asensio, J., Berbegal Ibañez, M. and Pelechà Aigües, N., How Arab Countries and Institutions Finance Development (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020); www.oecd.org/dac/dac-global-relations/Development_finance_Arab_countries_institutions.pdf.

One of their biggest challenges will be to create a system of bottom-up reporting that caters to citizens' needs and social aspirations

irregular migration, and radicalization directly promote long-term regional instability. One of their biggest challenges will be to create a system of bottom-up reporting that caters to citizens' needs and social aspirations.

This paper draws on a range of sources and data collection instruments, including a desk review that surveyed relevant academic literature in addition to reports and other documentation from regional and international organizations. It also involved locating journalistic sources and official statements issued by the Gulf States to identify themes and patterns in how they conceptualize peacebuilding and related terminologies such as peacemaking, mediation, and global security. Furthermore, Gulf State humanitarian and development aid data was tracked using the OCHA, UNDP, and OECD tracking systems. In addition, Gulf State donations to the multilateral peacebuilding system were tracked under the heading “peacebuilding” on the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office (MPTF Office) website, which “facilitates UN coherence and development effectiveness in addressing multifaceted issues—such as humanitarian crises, peacebuilding, recovery, and development—and engages in collaborative international efforts on pandemics, climate change, and biodiversity conservation.”⁴ Finally, the paper draws cumulatively on the author's long-standing research and professional engagement on the Gulf States' humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding policy and practice.

Definitions of peacebuilding

There is a notable imprecision in the terminologies used to define peacebuilding, both in theory and in practice. Terms such as “peacebuilding,” “peacemaking,” “post-war reconstruction,” “development assistance,” “peacekeeping,” “rehabilitation,” “peace enforcement,” and “state-building” are often used interchangeably, which makes differentiating between them challenging. Although the concept of peacebuilding is rooted in theoretical work by Johan Galtung and others from the 1960s and 1970s, major interest in peacebuilding by the UN agencies increased after the end of the Cold War.⁵

Since the inclusion of “peacebuilding” in the UN Agenda for Peace in 1992, the UN began to organize its operations under this name. The institutionalization of peacebuilding was a critical turning point for the international system, because “sustained peacebuilding work by the UN as a separate named activity really started here, though a lot of what the UN was doing before this through its specialized agencies might be considered peacebuilding by another name.”⁶ One of the most prominent examples of a clear lack of understanding of the

⁴ UNDP and MPTF, “About MPTF Office,” accessed July 25, 2021; <https://mptf.undp.org/overview/office>.

⁵ Stephen Ryan, “The Evolution of Peacebuilding,” *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (Routledge, 2015): pp. 25-35; <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203068175.ch2>; and Fernando Cavalcante, “The Influence of the Liberal Peace Framework on the United Nations Approach to Peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau,” *RCCS Annual Review*, no. 6 (January 2014); <https://doi.org/10.4000/rccsar.564>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

terminology is the distinction between peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and peace enforcement. Chapter VII of the UN Charter considers peacekeeping as the efforts that come before peace enforcement and before the imposition of sanctions, while peacemaking set out in Chapter VI of the UN Charter is conceived of being as “a non-restrictive list of peaceful, diplomatic, and judicial means of resolving disputes” through several tools such as “negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement and others.”⁷

Peacebuilding has been marked by an expansion in the tasks, activities, tools, actors, approaches, and sectors under its ambit over time. This is reflected in arguments that peacebuilding is not just an “instrumentalist method” to obtain peace but also a wider process with a multidimensional agenda, including development assistance, humanitarian aid, and post-war recovery, among many other disciplines.⁸ While some scholars differentiate between these terms, others place them under the umbrella of peacebuilding. Some observers have suggested that effective peacebuilding efforts contain various activities such as supporting democracy, humanitarian demining programs, enhancing human rights, the rule of law and elections, the right to freedom of speech and media, education, sports, research, and cultural heritage.⁹

Peacebuilding has also been the subject of a sustained critique over the past two decades. In particular, its opponents have criticized the international system for pursuing a “liberal peacebuilding” model in which transition from war to peace is predicated upon applying a linear model of free-market reforms and adopting democratic institutions. A significant strand of this critique focuses on how peacebuilding often involves top-down processes and ignores local societies, cultures, and capacities.¹⁰ I have previously criticized the term “peacebuilding” for being “biased towards external interventions that often adopt ‘quick fix’ and ad hoc approaches to war-torn societies.”¹¹

In short, there are as many distinct terms as there are features to this multidisciplinary process. Given this multiplicity of definitions and critiques, it is important to recognize that the term “peacebuilding” is not static. Its usage and interpretation by the Gulf States vary across time and space. Nonetheless, it is essential to compare and draw tentative generalizations regarding Gulf State approaches to peacebuilding. For the purpose of this paper, peacebuilding

⁷ Gabriela Monica Lucuta, “Peacemaking, Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Peace Enforcement in the 21st Century,” *Peace Insight*, April 25, 2014, [https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/peacemaking-peacekeeping-peacebuilding-peace-enforcement-21st-century/?location=&theme=](https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/peacemaking-peacekeeping-peacebuilding-peace-enforcement-21st-century/?location=&theme=;); and UN, “Chapter VI: Pacific Settlement of Disputes (Articles 33-38)” (United Nations, n.d.), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-6>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Luc Reyckler, “Peacemaking, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.274>.

¹⁰ M. Anne Brown, “Anthropology and Peacebuilding,” in Roger Mac Ginty, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (Routledge, 2013): pp. 132-146, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203068175.ch10>, 134.

¹¹ Sultan Barakat, “Post-Saddam Iraq: Deconstructing a Regime, Reconstructing a Nation,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 4–5 (2005): pp. 571-591, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500127800>, 273.

refers to the bottom-up practice of localizing peace with the acceptance of local contextual specificities and identities as the basis for local self-determination in peacebuilding trajectories. This definition considers the effectiveness of international peacekeeping in reducing violence at the local level through facilitating inter-communal dialogue.¹²

Gulf States' positioning in relation to peacebuilding

This section will present several stylized facts regarding the positioning of the Gulf States as peacebuilding actors. Firstly, it is important to recognize that the Gulf States do not significantly engage in mainstream peacebuilding in governance and institutional reforms as often operationalized by leading OECD-DAC donors. They also tend not to support micro-level, societal peacebuilding as practiced by a wide range of NGOs, community groups, faith-based associations, and others globally. There are several explanations for this trend. Critical observers hold that Gulf donors prefer direct, tangible, and short-term activities such as food security rather than supporting organizations that promote values of democracy or human rights, as these threaten the legitimacy and sovereignty of authoritarian regimes with poor human rights records.¹³ Another domestic explanation is that the Gulf States largely ignored the concept of social cohesion until the onset of the Arab Spring. Unlike Western societies that have been through struggles for racial and social justice, the Gulf States did not have the experience of investing in social cohesion—making mechanisms at the community level, projected by the West to the rest of the world as peacebuilding. Rather, the Gulf States have tended to view peacebuilding reductively as a form of philanthropy and not a field of practice based on building social cohesion, trust, and restoring community relations.

More generally, Gulf States have a long-standing commitment to sovereignty and non-interference. The mission creep of interventionist Western peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions is perceived as in tension with these normative positions. Peacebuilding was also seen as a stealth intervention to adjust peace agreements through hidden agendas. Instead, the Gulf States tend to engage in areas such as post-conflict infrastructural development, peacemaking and mediation, and increasingly in “hard” peacebuilding issues linked to security agendas, such as counterterrorism and security sector reform. The implications of this latter dynamic of the interplay of security and peace will be explored later in this paper.

Secondly, several Gulf States—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar—have become major humanitarian and development donors over the past few

Gulf States have tended to view peacebuilding reductively as a form of philanthropy and not a field of practice based on building social cohesion, trust, and restoring community relations

¹² Smidt, Hannah M. “United Nations peacekeeping locally: enabling conflict resolution, reducing communal violence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 2-3 (2020): 344-372.

¹³ M. Evren Tok, “Gulf Donors and the 2030 Agenda: Towards a Khaleeji Mode of Development Cooperation” (United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, November 2015).

decades. However, their financial contributions to peacebuilding account for a fairly low percentage of their overall foreign aid. For example, from 1999 to 2009, 62.83 percent of total aid contributions from the Gulf States were allocated to short-term relief responses to conflict-affected contexts, with 10.99 percent to reconstruction, 4.71 percent to development, and 21.47 percent unknown.¹⁴ While there has been an increase in peacebuilding contributions from Gulf donors in recent years, albeit as a low proportion of their overall foreign aid, Gulf officials tend to present their humanitarian and development assistance as forms of peacebuilding in public statements.

Thirdly, Gulf States do not routinely follow fine distinctions between “peacebuilding,” “peacemaking,” “conflict transformation,” and other terms but rather frame much of their international engagement as contributing towards peace and security. They understand that almost all work under the rubric of peace agreements contributes to peace. This can be read from official statements by Gulf leaders. Since 1989, Saudi Arabia has been extensively involved in regional peace pacts, hosting conferences, and financing peacebuilding projects in countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. Official sources state that Saudi involvement aims to bring together warring parties to unify peoples, end wars, resolve conflict, and promote stability at the regional and international levels.¹⁵ Saudi envoy to the UN, Ambassador Abdallah Al-Mouallimi—speaking at a peacebuilding and peacekeeping event at the UN General Assembly—stated that the country is assigning effort as part of its commitment to “fundamental principles that are at the forefront of the task of building and maintaining peace.”¹⁶

The UAE embraces many humanitarian institutions in Dubai, with a growing desire to play roles greater than its size in peacebuilding and peacemaking issues in the region. In 2018, the Minister of State, Zaki Nusseibeh, presided over the UAE delegation to the two-day UN High-level Meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.¹⁷ Zaki Nusseibeh mentioned that the “UAE’s approach to peace has always been long-term and multifaceted with prevention at its core.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Sultan Barakat and Steven Zyck, “Gulf State Assistance to Conflict-Affected Environments” (Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, 2010).

¹⁵ Saleh al-Zeid, “Saudi Arabia: Nine Decades Peacemaking, Creating Regional Stability,” *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, September 23, 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2524256/saudi-arabia-nine-decades-peacemaking-creating-regional-stability>.

¹⁶ Arab News Report, “Saudi Arabia Confirms Commitment to Peace-Building at UN Forum,” Arab News, April 26, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1292266>.

¹⁷ UN UAE, “UAE Reaffirms Commitment to Peacebuilding Worldwide” (Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations, April 29, 2018), <https://www.un.int/uae/news/uae-reaffirms-commitment-peacebuilding-worldwide>.

¹⁸ UN UAE and H.E. Zaki Nusseibeh, “UAE Statement at High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace” (Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations, April 24, 2018), https://www.un.int/uae/statements_speeches/uae-statement-high-level-meeting-general-assembly-peacebuilding-and-sustaining.

62 percent of all Gulf aid was granted to Arab countries between 1970 and 2008, while Asian and African countries received 21 percent and 15 percent, respectively

It is important to note that the majority of aid provided by Gulf States is dispersed to Arab countries. Kuwait is “positioning itself globally and regionally as a key and equitable actor in political assistance, peacebuilding, and development fields.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, Qatar was highly engaged in peacebuilding, humanitarian, and post-war reconstruction efforts in several conflict zones over the past ten years. Qatar facilitated this by supporting Arab Spring revolutions, adopting the values of freedom and democracy, and supporting mediation between the Palestinian factions to facilitate reconciliation. This includes the constant efforts to host, finance, and implement the activities of mediation, reconstruction, and development in many conflict areas such as Lebanon, Sudan, Gaza, Yemen, and others.²⁰ While a significant amount of humanitarian aid is granted to Arab countries, the provision to non-Arab countries is limited, with the majority going to Turkey, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia.²¹ Overall, 62 percent of all Gulf aid was granted to Arab countries between 1970 and 2008, while Asian and African countries received 21 percent and 15 percent, respectively.²²

Gulf States’ role in peacebuilding

This section will provide a brief overview of the ways in which the Gulf States make contributions towards peacebuilding.

Multilateral peacebuilding system

The multilateral peacebuilding system refers to the interaction and collaboration of multilateral organizations in creating more joint operations to overcome the challenges that arise from complex conflict settings.²³ This way of mobilizing international assistance effectively eradicates institutional silos and enables a transition to a longer-term focus on development and sustainable peace. However, before tracking Gulf State contributions to the multilateral peacebuilding system, it is essential to note that the GCC has only acted collectively as a peacebuilding actor in Yemen, where a GCC-brokered agreement was reached. Thus, there is a weakness in regional cooperation, and the GCC concept does not work to manage regional conflict.

Since the implementation of the blockade of Qatar in June 2017, there has been increased competition between the Gulf States for international attention. This

¹⁹ UN Kuwait, “The United Nations in the State of Kuwait,” accessed September 2021, <https://kuwait.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>.

²⁰ Elia Zureik, “Qatar’s Humanitarian Aid to Palestine,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (June 2017): pp. 786-798, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1392087>.

²¹ Khaled AlMezaini, “Humanitarian Foreign Aid of Gulf States” (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, January 2021), <https://www.kas.de/documents/286298/8668222/Policy+Report+No+20+Foreign+Aid+and+Gulf+Countries.pdf/b56652f2-7c29-1358-e58a-ab72f0f35ee8>.

²² Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, “Gulf Country Donorship: Opportunities and Challenges for International Cooperation” (Overseas Development Institute, 2017).

²³ Brigitte Rohwerder, “The Multilateral System’s Contribution to Peace and Security” (Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, December 5, 2014), <http://gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq1173.pdf>.

has included multilateral funding donations that bring considerable publicity, such as donations to UNICEF. The Gulf States have provided financial and other support to the global, multilateral peacebuilding architecture. Table 1 below shows that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE have all provided similar levels of support to the UN Peacebuilding Fund between 2006 and 2024. However, this is dwarfed by the contributions of larger donors. For example, the UN Peacebuilding Fund received \$236 million from Sweden, \$224 million from Germany, and \$159 million from the Netherlands. Moreover, Gulf State contributions are comparable to much less generous donors to the UN Peacebuilding Fund like Estonia and the United States of America (US), who contributed \$697,000 and \$550,000, respectively. The parity with the US may be rooted in the perception that their security is tied to US guarantees; the lower prioritization of peacebuilding follows US lead.

Table 1. Gulf State contributions to the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, 2006 to 2024²⁴

State	Deposits real-time (USD)
Qatar	600,000
Saudi Arabia	600,000
Kuwait	500,000
UAE	500,000
Bahrain	10,000

Gulf States have provided other donations to various bodies within the UN peacebuilding apparatus. As shown in Table 2, the level of funding from Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE are within a similar range of \$5 to \$7 million USD. In comparison to Saudi Arabia’s additional financing which is \$900,000.

Table 2: Selected funding from Gulf States to UN peace-related funds²⁵

State	Amount in US\$	Date	Channel
Qatar	7,382,742	2004-2018	UNDG Iraq Trust Fund, Peacebuilding Fund, Counter Piracy Trust Fund, Iraq UNDAF Trust Fund

²⁴ UNDP and MPPTF, “The Peacebuilding Fund,” UNDP Multi-Partner Trust Fund, accessed July 25, 2021, <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/PB000UNDP>.

²⁵ Ibid.

KSA	900,000	2007-2013	Peacebuilding Fund, Counter Piracy Trust Fund
Kuwait	6,183,581	2004-2018	NDG Iraq Trust Fund, Peacebuilding Fund, Counter Piracy Trust Fund, Iraq UNDAF Trust Fund
UAE	5,890,752	2007-2021	UNITLIFE Trust Fund, Colombia Peace UNMPTF, UN Action Against Sexual Violence, Counter Piracy Trust Fund, Peacebuilding Fund

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have emerged as major donors to the UN counterterrorism apparatus. Table 3 illustrates that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are the largest donors, with pledges of \$110 million and \$92.77 million, respectively. Their contributions are much higher than the next largest donor, the European Union (EU), with its pledge of \$16.627 million. Gulf donations included Saudi Arabia gifting over \$100 million to establish the UN Counter-Terrorism Center in 2011, formally incorporated under the UN Department of Political Affairs, (now called the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs). Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism funding was initially driven by the fallout from the September 11 attacks, carried out by mostly Saudi nationals. Since then, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been locked in competition over positioning themselves as counterterrorism champions, both to deflect mutual allegations over support for terrorism and to curry favor with successive U.S. administrations in the context of the War on Terror.

Table 3: Pledges of the top six donors to the Trust Fund for Counterterrorism 2009–2020²⁶

Donor	Pledge (\$USD)
Saudi Arabia	110,000,000
Qatar	92,770,000
European Union	16,627,786
EOSG Peace and Security Sub-funds (China)	7,268,080
United States of America	6,940,230
Netherlands	6,573,219

²⁶ UN OCT, “Funding and Donors” (UN), accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/funding-and-donors>.

Gulf State bilateral and charitable contributions to peacebuilding

The Gulf States have also supported peacebuilding activities through bilateral, charitable, and society-to-society aid to conflict-affected contexts. Much of this support is not labeled peacebuilding by the Gulf State actors involved. Yet it includes activities ordinarily considered under the umbrella of peacebuilding in areas such as promoting social cohesion, community empowerment, or inclusion of women and youth in a range of conflict-affected contexts.

Amidst the war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the largest donor to Yemen, was involved in many projects within the framework of peacebuilding. For example, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States and King Salman Center Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center jointly implemented three educational projects in Yemen aimed at “expanding learning opportunities for out-of-school children,” including an education for peace project. In 2021, the UAE donated \$800,000 to the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs to promote the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The UAE was the first Gulf State to establish national programs supporting WPS. Furthermore, the UAE has committed to devoting at least 15% of its total foreign aid to humanitarian purposes, including direct responses to emergencies and multilateral organizations to strengthen the global humanitarian system. Another example from the UAE is the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, a \$1 million initiative provided under the name of “Global Prosperity” related to “sustainable development, commercial innovation, peacebuilding, and climate change.”

Qatar Charity (QC) has also supported a range of peacebuilding-related projects. For instance, its Sports for Peace and Development in Darfur initiative has been praised by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime as a “successful model for countering extremism in its Technical Manual on Preventing Extremism through Sports.” Similarly, in July 2020, the Qatar Fund for Development and the Save the Dream Foundation of the International Center for Sports Security launched a grant agreement “aimed at empowering youth and promoting peace and development in Libya through sport.” In addition, QC initiated its 2020–2021 winter campaign, Warmth and Peace, “targeting nearly one million persons, including the displaced, refugees, the needy and the affected, in 19 countries across Africa, Asia, and Europe, at a total cost of approximately 66 million Qatari riyals.” While there are many other potential examples of Gulf State bilateral and charitable peacebuilding efforts, this remains a relatively small area of activity compared to their substantial humanitarian and development assistance.

Interfaith dialogue and peace

One major area in which the Gulf States have invested is in the related areas of religion, interfaith dialogue, and reconciliation. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has

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a long history in the field of interfaith and intercultural dialogue. For example, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) is an intergovernmental organization that contains a “dual governance structure, a Council of Parties made of States, and a Board of Directors made up of religious leaders” that “bring together followers of different religious traditions, religious leaders and policymakers.”²⁷ Another example from the UAE is the Muslim Council of Elders, an “independent international organization that was established to promote peace in the Muslim communities.”²⁸ The center supports interfaith peace dialogue and organizes conferences and initiatives in the same field in Dubai, such as the Dialogue of East and West initiative; Peace Convoys Dialogue for Myanmar; and others. More recently, the UAE has promoted harmony between the Abrahamic faiths, which comes in the context of its normalization of relations with Israel.

In another example, Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, established in 2010, “aims to support and promote a culture of interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence among followers of different religions.”²⁹ Kuwait also participates in many conferences related to interfaith dialogue and organizes many seminars. In 2018, the secretary-general of KAICIID praised the Kuwaiti contributions to peacebuilding and support for interfaith dialogue in Vienna during the KAICIID-led conference.³⁰ This strong support for interfaith dialogue is rooted in the Gulf States' shared faith-based enthusiasm to build peace. In a report published in 2010, I argued:

Gulf State aid has been motivated by religiously rooted principles of charitable giving which have frequently been molded according to, in particular, the national political objectives of donor countries. However, rather than being a solely strategic undertaking, Gulf State donorship also reflects principled positions related to human security, cultural integrity, and state sovereignty.³¹

That analysis still holds today and can be extended from the domain of foreign aid to an understanding of the Gulf State's role in peacebuilding. This is in line with scholarship that traces the roots of peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Islam. This scholarship demonstrates that there are strong foundations in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic traditions that support the adoption of peaceful means and promote peacebuilding strategies in conflict resolution instead of the use of violence.³²

²⁷ King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, “Who We Are,” accessed August 3, 2021, <https://www.kaiciid.org/who-we-are>.

²⁸ Muslim Council of Elders, “Who We Are,” accessed September 2021, <https://www.muslim-elders.com/en>.

²⁹ Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, “About Us,” accessed September 2021, http://www.dicid.org/about_us_dicid/.

³⁰ “The Secretary of the King Abdullah Center Appreciates the Contributions of Kuwait in Supporting Interfaith Dialogue (In Arabic),” *Kuwait News Agency*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2991606&Language=ar>.

³¹ Barakat and Zyck, “Gulf State Assistance to Conflict-Affected Environments.”

³² Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (University Press of Florida, 2003).

The Janus Face of the Gulf States in Peacebuilding

The Gulf States have funded UN and other formal peacebuilding activities and engaged in various diplomatic and other activities that influence the dynamics of peace and conflict in multiple contexts. For Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, this can be characterized as a Janus Face in peacebuilding, in that they have all simultaneously been significant external actors behind the escalation and continuation of conflict in both the Arab world and the Horn of Africa, while also exhibiting a capacity to bring an end to conflict and support peace.

The clearest example of this contradictory mix of roles is the Saudi–Emirati-led intervention in Yemen since 2015 that has led to a devastating war and the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. For many observers internationally, it would seem contradictory to talk of the peacebuilding role of Saudi Arabia, given its deep involvement in the war in Yemen. In 2017, a group of humanitarian, human rights, and peacebuilding actors launched strategic litigation attempting to rule that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia were illegal. While unsuccessful, it led to the 2019 Court of Appeal ruling that it was “irrational and therefore unlawful” for the UK to have granted arms export licenses for the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia to be used in Yemen in the absence of any assessment of whether violations of International Humanitarian Law had been committed.³³ In recent years, the war in Yemen has dominated the Western media narrative around Saudi Arabia, which has somewhat obscured the lesser noticed role of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in conflict mediation and peacebuilding.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the country considers its effort as part of its commitment to the “fundamental principles that are at the forefront of the task of building and maintaining peace.” Saudi envoy to the UN, Ambassador Abdallah Al-Mouallimi, mentioned this at the 2018 High-level Meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, further asserting that Saudi Arabia has always sought to end and solve disputes peacefully including through Saudi support for the Palestinian cause, as the country has supported the Arab peace initiative since 2002.³⁴

Most notably, Saudi Arabia and the UAE jointly engaged in mediation that resulted in signing a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea to end the long conflict between the two neighboring countries. Leaders in the Saudi royal family hosted the two heads of state at a three-sided meeting held in Jeddah on

³³ Gemma Davies, “Advocating for Better Protection for Conflict-Affected Populations: Legal Action against UK Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia for Use in the Yemen Conflict” (ODI, July 1, 2021), <https://odi.org/en/publications/advocating-for-better-protection-for-conflict-affected-populations-legal-action-against-uk-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-for-use-in-the-yemen-conflict/>.

³⁴ Arab News Report, “Saudi Arabia Confirms Commitment to Peace-Building at UN Forum.”

September 16, 2018.³⁵ This step was supported by Abiy Ahmed's election and accelerated by intensive UAE and US backchannel diplomacy. Saudi Arabia also held the first peace dialogue encounter between Djibouti and Eritrea in Jeddah on September 18, 2018.³⁶ Ismail Omar Guelleh, the Djiboutian President, highly praised Saudi mediation, and expressed that Saudi Arabia's engagement was very important to restore Djibouti–Eritrea relations.³⁷ In addition, some commentators consider that Saudi–Emirati mediation between Ethiopia and Eritrea reveals a strong eagerness from the two Gulf allies to appear as a “regional stabilizing actor and peace-broker” in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Through these steps, and by investing in each other's contacts and relations in the Horn, Saudi Arabia and the UAE intended to cement an arc of political influence throughout the region.³⁸

Qatar has also exhibited a Janus Face in terms of its engagement in the dynamics of peace and conflict in and beyond the Arab region.³⁹ This was most notable during the early days of the Arab Spring when Qatar intervened militarily in Libya and provided significant amounts of funding and support to various rebel groups in Syria. In this period, it seemed that the peacemaking role and neutral foreign policy that Qatar had innovated during the late 2000s had been eclipsed by a more interventionist and partisan foreign policy.⁴⁰ However, Qatar has returned to its peacemaking role in recent years, for instance, mediating the high-profile US–Taliban agreement signed in February 2020 and the intra-Afghan peace talks throughout 2019 to 2021.

Yet the role of Qatar in the Horn of Africa, similarly to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, continues to fit the Janus Face characterization. Over the past decade, Qatar has slowly emerged as one of the major external powers influencing Somalia's political system. Qatar attracted much criticism for its backing of powerful individuals, particularly spy chief Fahad Yasin and President Farmaajo, who stoked the political crisis in 2021 that nearly tipped the country into an escalating war.⁴¹ However, this negative perception was swiftly turned around as Qatar was credited with using its mediation capacities to reach a

³⁵ Benjamin Yoel, “The Ethiopia-Eritrea Peace Deal: Why Now?” (Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, November 21, 2018); <https://dayan.org/content/ethiopia-eritrea-peace-deal-why-now>.

³⁶ UN News, “UN Chief Welcomes Meeting between Leaders of Djibouti and Eritrea” (United Nations, September 18, 2018); <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1019642>.

³⁷ Camille Lons, “Saudi Arabia and the UAE Look to Africa” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 23, 2018); <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77561>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sultan Barakat, “The Qatari Spring: Qatar's Emerging Role in Peacemaking” (Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, 2012): pp. 94-112.

⁴⁰ Sultan Barakat, “Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement,” Brookings Doha Center (Foreign Policy at Brookings, November 12, 2014); <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Final-PDF-English.pdf>.

⁴¹ Ahmed, Guled, “A Rigged Election in Somalia Could Open the Door to Civil War” (Middle East Institute, 2021); <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rigged-election-somalia-could-open-door-civil-war>.

political agreement and restore diplomatic relations between Somalia and Kenya.⁴²

In contrast to this Janus Face, the states of Oman and Kuwait have played a more straightforward peacebuilding role. In particular, the Sultanate of Oman has generated much praise internationally as a leading regional peacemaker in the aftermath of the death of Sultan Qaboos in January 2020.⁴³ Oman, unlike Qatar, declined any involvement in the Saudi–Emirati-led war in Yemen and did not join the blockade of Qatar in 2017. In addition, Oman has engaged in quiet diplomacy, facilitating talks between the US, other international parties, and Iran over the Iran nuclear deal. It has also played an essential role in the mediation of the Yemeni war as “the country’s amicable relations with Saudi Arabia, Ansar Allah, Iran, and other Yemeni and international conflict stakeholders has allowed it to facilitate negotiations in a manner few other countries are able or willing to realize.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Baabood argues that peaceful resolution of conflict is deeply embedded as a norm in Omani society and that “Oman’s peacebuilding role in Yemen is evidence of its ideational factors and the pragmatism of its foreign policy.”⁴⁵

Similarly, the death of Kuwait’s ruler, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, in September 2020 was met with obituaries underlining his importance as a leading regional statesman with a long-standing role in peacemaking and mediation. Sheikh Sabah played an important role as a “mediator between Lebanese factions and warring Yemeni parties, he was instrumental in resolving disputes between Bangladesh and Pakistan, and he tried hard to bring Qatar back into the Gulf fold.”⁴⁶ Since the beginning of the blockade imposed on Qatar by the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain, Kuwait resolved to mediate the crisis through repeated efforts between 2017 and 2021. In addition, following the January 2021 al-Ula agreement, Kuwait set the ambitious goal of mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

There is increasingly a divergence in the paths followed by the Gulf States in terms of their overall foreign policy and their approaches to engagement in conflict zones globally. Various Gulf States—particularly Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar—value their roles as mediators and facilitators in various conflict-affected contexts in the Arab world, Horn of Africa, and elsewhere. Peacebuilding has been increasingly associated as an intervention in line with Western donors’

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⁴² Desirée Custers, “Qatar and Somalia-Kenya Relations: Projection of Mediation Power in the Horn of Africa” (Stimson Center, May 19, 2021); <https://www.stimson.org/2021/qatar-and-somalia-kenya-relations-projection-of-mediation-power-in-the-horn-of-africa/>.

⁴³ Ben Hubbard, “Oman’s New Sultan Vows to Continue Country’s Peacemaking Path,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/world/middleeast/oman-sultan.html>.

⁴⁴ Abdullah Baabood, “Omani Perspectives on the Peace Process in Yemen” (Berghof Foundation, June 7, 2021); <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/omani-perspectives-on-the-peace-process-in-yemen>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor, “Farewell to the Emir of Kuwait, an Arab Patriot and Peacemaker,” *Arab News*, October 1, 2020; <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1742446>.

Humanitarian assistance, development financing, and peace/security engagement have all been employed as tools for peacebuilding and for pursuing the interests of individual Gulf States locked in competition for regional and global influence in various conflict-affected contexts

interests around stabilization and counterterrorism. These “hard” forms of peace and security policy are in most cases implemented in and through nation-states and governments. If the Gulf States were to provide substantial support for these forms of intervention through nation-state structures, then it would potentially jeopardize their neutrality in the eyes of non-state armed groups that are party to ongoing and future peace processes, thus reducing the likelihood of their acceptance as a third-party mediator. This can be seen in the case of Afghanistan, where Qatar has not provided substantial humanitarian, development, or peacebuilding aid—yet was accepted as a mediator. By contrast, Germany, which has provided military forces and vast amounts of development and peacebuilding aid through the Afghan government, was rejected as a facilitator or mediator of intra-Afghan peace talks by the Taliban due to the perception of bias towards the government side. While Oman will likely maintain its role as a “pure” facilitator, mediator, and peacemaker, Qatar has long moved past this phase and plays a multifaceted role. Qatari peacebuilding engagement—broadly conceived to involve the full range of hard and soft conflict response tools at the state’s disposal—may be restricted in particular contexts such as Afghanistan. However, Qatar has emerged to be a confident and proactive peacebuilding champion.

Intra-Gulf rivalries and peacebuilding

The Gulf States’ impact on peacebuilding cannot be solely analyzed in terms of resource flows to peacebuilding and peacemaking activities of individual states. Rather, their role must also be cast in a comparative perspective in terms of the synergies and pathologies among Gulf State peacebuilding writ large.

Humanitarian assistance, development financing, and peace/security engagement have all been employed as tools for peacebuilding and for pursuing the interests of individual Gulf States locked in competition for regional and global influence in various conflict-affected contexts. While this has been a feature of the Gulf States’ role in the Middle East, mainly since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, it accelerated after the Gulf Crisis in 2017. While geopolitical competition between the Gulf States was strongest in Syria and Libya during the Arab Spring years, the epicenter of competition has shifted somewhat to the Horn of Africa since 2017, particularly Somalia. Renowned Horn of Africa analyst Rashid Abdi states that “Somalia has become a chessboard in the power game between Qatar and Turkey on the one side and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their allies on the other.”

Over the past decade, the UAE has supported local security forces in Somalia, providing training and salaries for anti-piracy forces and various security and police forces. Turkey has also provided major support for a new military academy opened in 2017 at the cost of \$50 million. In addition, while it

“traditionally steered clear of the security sphere” in Somalia, Qatar provided training for the Somali National Army in Eritrea. All these instances of security sector reform can be classified as forms of peacebuilding, albeit with a “hard” security focus. Yet rather than building peace, a Crisis Group report finds that:

Gulf rivalries—whether directly or indirectly—appear almost certain to have exacerbated divisions, hardening both the government’s and its rivals’ positions and complicating efforts to reach consensus. They have added a thorny new layer to elite struggles in the capital. The UAE versus Qatar/Turkey rivalry also appears to be aggravating factionalism within the security forces. This dissension risks undermining the campaign against Al-Shabaab and could stoke future conflict, given that it often mirrors political divides.⁴⁷

It is noteworthy, however, that Qatar does not publicize or even admit its role in training Somalia’s security forces. Therefore, it cannot be known how Qatari policymakers frame such interventions. This is likely due to the extreme sensitivity of the Somalia file considering the accusations made against Qatar regarding support for terrorism by Saudi Arabia and the UAE since 2017.

This reticence of Qatar and the other Gulf States to be open about their role in peace and security dynamics across the region brings a central dynamic into sharp focus. Much criticism of the role of the Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia in particular, operates under the assumption that if states are active parties to a particular conflict, then those states cannot also be engaged in peacebuilding in that conflict setting. The archetype of this analytical blind spot is the war in Yemen, in which Saudi provision of humanitarian or development aid, attempts to broker ceasefires, or participation in the peace process is dismissed as irrelevant compared to the magnitude of destruction in the war or even as “peacewashing” or laundering their damaged global reputation. While much criticism of the Saudi-led war in Yemen is warranted, there is a good deal of Orientalism and analysis lacking in nuance when it comes to evaluating the role of the Gulf States in peace and conflict dynamics in the Middle East and beyond.

For example, Western nations invade countries on the pretext of “humanitarian intervention” and engage in counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations while simultaneously supporting security sector reform, building institutional capacity, and attempting to influence the dynamics of the underlying political settlement. Although this occurs all in the same conflict context, there is much greater acceptance when Western countries can engage in both “hard” and “soft” forms of conflict response simultaneously. However, when the Gulf States engage in a similar range of activities in the same conflict zone, it is often reductively labeled as “proxy warfare” or supporting local factions. In this regard, the great powers have the discursive ability to frame

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⁴⁷ Crisis Group, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis* (Crisis Group, Report No. 260, 2018); www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/260-somalia-and-gulf-crisis.

their overall conflict response in a much more positive light than is afforded to small and medium powers such as the Gulf States.

Opportunities for Gulf State engagement in peacebuilding

It is unlikely that all or even many of the GCC states will emerge as peacebuilding champions in a manner akin to their transformative impact on the humanitarian sector over the past decade. However, all Gulf States have some capacity to play a role within a broader ecosystem of conflict response and peacebuilding in and beyond the Arab world. As the Gulf States consider expanding their roles in peacebuilding, they could benefit from taking up the following strategic recommendations.

Complementary conflict response in the GCC

The Gulf States should reach an agreement on comparative advantage and harmonization of roles across the spectrum of conflict response. While the shape of such a Gulf ecosystem of conflict response could take on various constellations, there are clear elements of comparative advantage and natural roles. For example, Kuwait has long-standing experience in development cooperation, particularly in infrastructure. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE deal effectively in “hard” security issues, and Qatar and Oman are better positioned to take the lead in peacebuilding. Moreover, Qatar has vast mediation and peacemaking experience, and demonstrated willingness to operate in a collaborative model enabled by their ample resources to support full spectrum conflict response and regional peace and security leadership aspirations. Qatar has demonstrated its conflict response endurance while it weathered the storm of the illegal blockade from 2017 to 2021, also proving its commitment to upholding international law. These assets and capabilities place Qatar in the best position of the Gulf States to edge closer to the role of a major peacebuilding champion.

Model peacebuilding through domestic social cohesion strategies

For any of the Gulf States to play a major role in peacebuilding will require a high degree of social cohesion from within. While several Gulf States have a high level of internal stability like Qatar and the UAE, other Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain exhibit social fissures including sectarian, ideological, or expat/local divides that must be overcome. Yet doing so is a distinct advantage for any Gulf peacebuilding actor and could help **model the domestic path to stability more broadly across the Arab world** as it is currently struggling with deep instability and societal divisions.

Embrace Yemen as a Gulf State

Beyond ending the conflict in Yemen, **the GCC must embrace Yemen as an integral part of the Gulf.** Given its diversity, geography, the potential to support food security, and much more—there is much that Yemen and the Gulf

have to offer one another in terms of regional integration and cooperation. However, with the world's worst humanitarian crisis on the doorstep of Gulf States, any talk of playing a global peacebuilding role must be tempered with the imperative to recognize that there is a major conflict in their backyard. Nearly all Gulf State actors are deeply implicated.

Approach conflict response confidently

For the Gulf States to emerge as true peacebuilding champions, **they should not continue to downplay or shy away from the full spectrum role they play in various conflict zones but continue to act as good faith humanitarian, development, and peace partners.** This point mainly applies to Qatar and the UAE, which play a multifaceted role in conflict response and are not limited to one form of engagement. Downplaying Qatar's role in peace and security due to political sensitivities only serves to play into the accusations and narratives promoted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE over Qatar's meddling role in the region and beyond.

Move beyond counterterrorism baggage

With two decades having elapsed since the September 11 attacks, **the Gulf States should collectively resolve to move past the baggage of the War on Terror with which they have been burdened primarily by the United States.** Twenty years of draconian, ineffective, and blunt counterterrorism policies and practices have transformed the landscape of conflict in the Middle East and run counter to the need for genuine peacebuilding. While Qatar provides financial support to the UN counterterrorism architecture, its support is largely for the "soft" side of education, jobs, and training to counter violent extremism and not the "hard" side of military counterterrorism, which Saudi Arabia primarily supports. In public communications, Qatari stakeholders should be more explicit in this distinction so as not to unjustly tarnish Qatar's valuable role as a peacebuilding actor with increasingly securitized discourses around stabilization and counterterrorism.

Promote peace through the triple nexus

While the Gulf States may not all aspire to play the role of "peacebuilding champions" or even peacebuilding actors, they could **make a substantive contribution towards peace and security through aligning their existing humanitarian and development roles with the sensitivities and dynamics of peace and conflict in recipient societies.** This stands in recognition that the humanitarian and development assistance provided by the Gulf States is substantial and that one of the most direct ways for the GCC to contribute towards peacebuilding is through triple nexus reforms.

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Invest in national peacebuilding capacities

The Gulf States should continue to **invest in deepening their own societal capacities for peacebuilding**. Over the past decades, the Gulf States invested in national capacities for peacebuilding practice, policy, and knowledge production. While offering a good base, no Gulf State has a national infrastructure capable of supporting their emergence as a prominent peacebuilding actor. For example, Germany has a vast array of foundations and institutes that enable a whole-of-society approach to peacebuilding in which the state is not always front and center. By contrast, Gulf States are uncomfortable delegating peacebuilding roles to non-state actors. This is partly rooted in fear that the state will get the blame if things go wrong when a non-state actor is involved. Qatar has made the largest strides in investing in national capacities for peacebuilding. For instance, institutionalizing its peacemaking role in the Special Envoy for Counterterrorism and Mediation in Conflict Resolution, establishing the Doha Forum as a leading platform for peace and security discussions, and investing in knowledge production capacities such as the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies and the College of Public Policy at Hamad bin Khalifa University. However, these existing capacities must be complemented with more multifaceted approaches with better policies to create a genuine peacebuilding support ecosystem within the State of Qatar.

Conclusion

The Gulf States are increasingly establishing themselves as global players in terms of security and development within the international system, which differs from their historical foreign policy. This report has analyzed some of the emergent peacebuilding roles and practices of the Gulf States comparatively and highlighted key issues and dilemmas. While there remains a long way to go, given the right strategic approach and sustained investment, individual Gulf States could emerge as important partners for peacebuilding both regionally and globally—in particular those not directly involved in the war in Yemen. More broadly, the emergence of the Gulf States as peacebuilding champions would also be hastened by a change in donor mindset from viewing the GCC transactionally as a source of funding to embracing their niche roles and potential for distinctive peacebuilding roles founded on deep understanding of local context, culture, and Islam.

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